

THE SETTLERS FIRST HANDS-ON PREVIEW

PC GAMER[®]

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MMO THAT
WON'T DIE



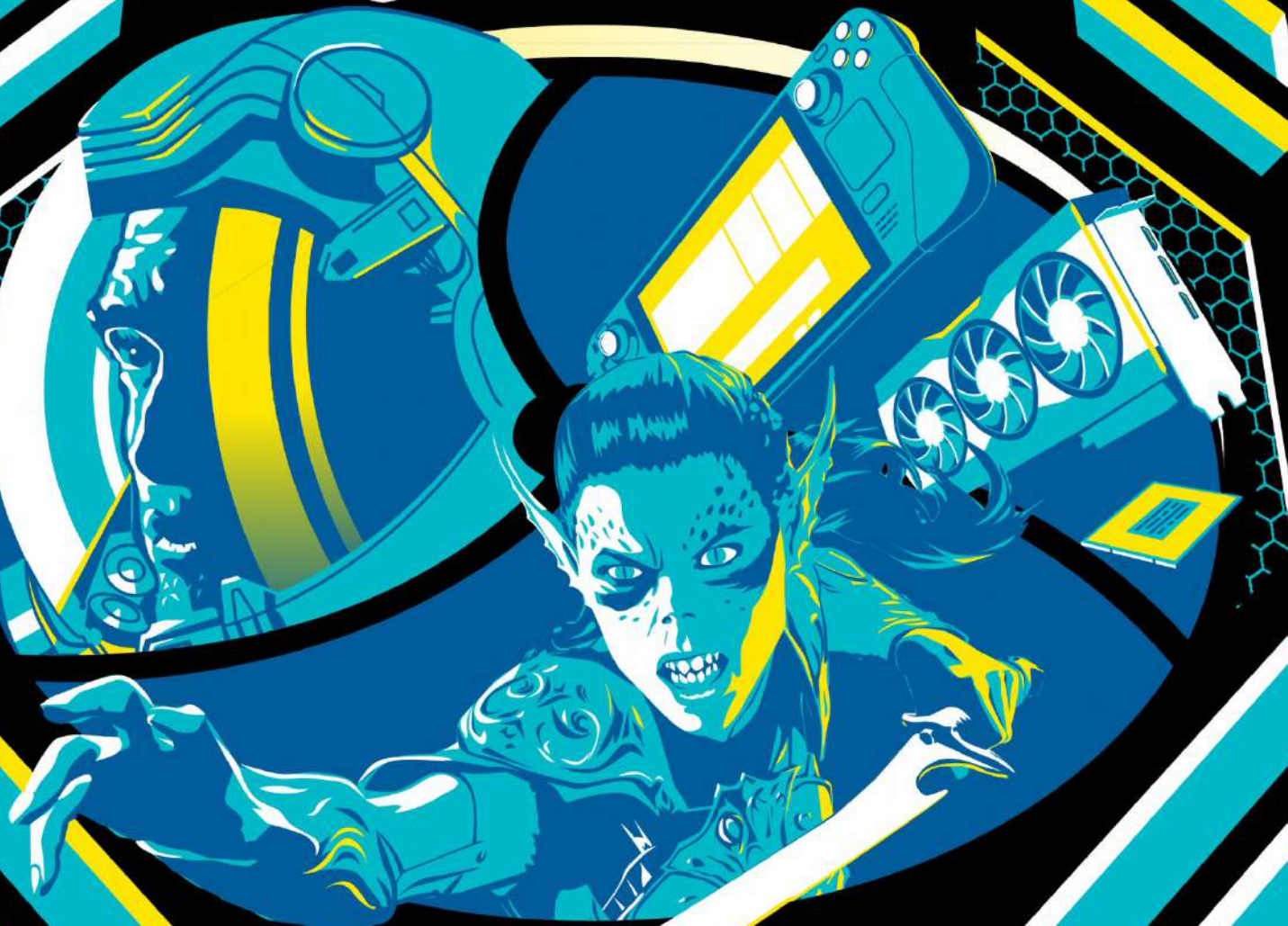
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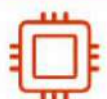
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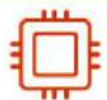
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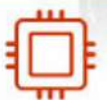
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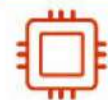
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“LET US BE YOUR BEACON OF POSITIVE THINKING THIS MONTH”

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

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This month

Sacrificed a kerbal and read the future in its adorable entrails.

as we lay out everything you should be psyched about for 2022 and beyond – from enormous upcoming games, to killer hardware innovations, to the trends taking the industry in bold new directions. The future's bright, and the future's now.

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

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The PC Gamer team

**WES FENLON**

Twitter

@wesleyfenlon

This month

Led the way on a feature so full of positivity he had to kick a puppy afterwards to balance himself out.

**CHRIS LIVINGSTON**

Twitter

@screencuisine

This monthCouldn't get settled in *The Settlers* without some horrible AI coming along and burning his town.**FRASER BROWN**

Twitter

@FraserlBrown

This month

Customised himself a horrific daemonic form. If only he could give it a proper sleep schedule.

**DAVE JAMES**

Twitter

@Not_the_GK

This month

Solved the GPU shortage crisis by figuring out you don't need a new one after all. See p48...

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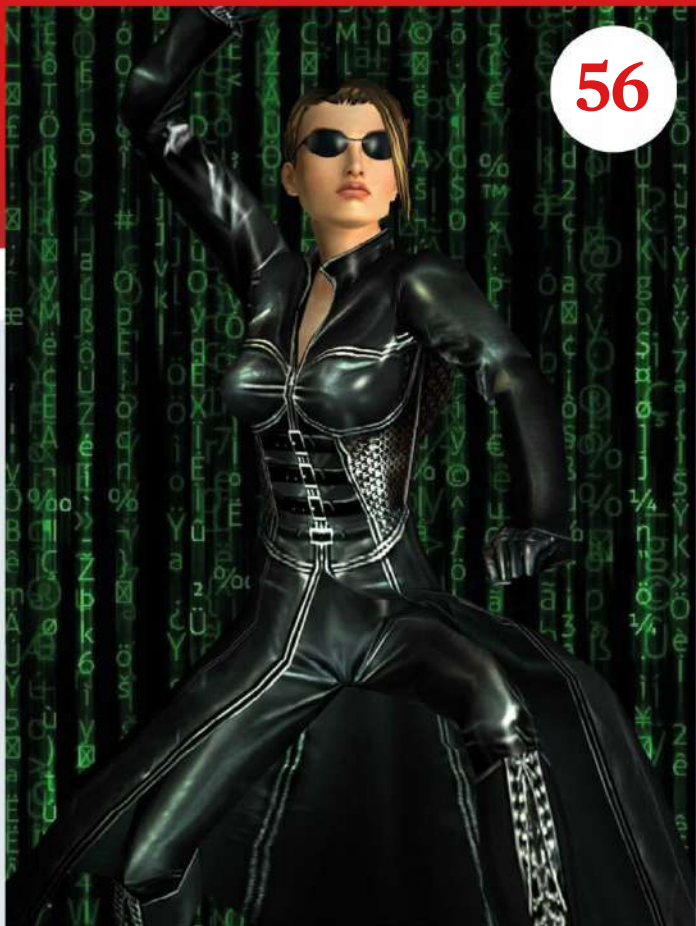
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MONITOR

NEW EVENT



BRAAAAINS

Over a decade after release, **PROJECT ZOMBOD** attracts an astonishing horde of players

Project Zomboid was first released as a tech demo in April 2011, before releasing on Steam in November 2013. It had a rocky ride in those early years, with a big game leak and the theft of two laptops containing a bunch of code which hadn't been backed up: developer The Indie Stone would, rather winningly, go on to give an industry talk titled How (Not) To Make a Game.

Indie Stone now need to write another presentation: how to turn your passion project into a viral hit ten-and-a-half years after release.

The multiplayer is the headline attraction, but Build 41 also introduced massive improvements to the combat system.

Since December 2021 *Project Zomboid's* player numbers have gone through the roof: the cause is a major update that overhauls the game from the ground-up. Build 41 introduced a new animation and movement system, vastly improved multiplayer functionality, a new city, a new combat system, a bunch of new

“WE KNEW WE HAD SOMETHING SPECIAL BREWING WITH BUILD 41”

systems, and too many other things to list. Project Zomboid has always had a decent playerbase but, following this release, has been averaging about 50,000 concurrent players on Steam, peaking at 65,505 players.

DEAD GOOD

PCG spoke to Chris Simpson, coder and MD at The Indie Stone. “We knew we had something special brewing with build 41,” says Simpson. “The response from our community in the long beta was overwhelmingly positive about the improvement to the game over previous builds, and the knowledge of what multiplayer would add to it made us confident

ORGANIC ONE-POT

FLEXIBLE OLED PANELS



Researchers just produced the first ever fully 3D-printed OLED panel using a custom tabletop printer that “costs about the same as a Tesla Model S”. It’s just 64 pixels now but, if they manage to up the res, it’ll be a step toward cheaper OLED screens for wearables, maybe even gaming monitors. ■ **KW**

WALKING DEAD

UNDYING LIGHT



Techland announced that *Dying Light 2* will take 500 hours to fully complete. That’s almost as much time as it would take to walk from Warsaw to Madrid, the studio boasted, before clarifying that the ‘main’ game should only take 70-80 hours. ■ **IM**



QUEER EYE

GAME JOLT PURGE



A handful of queer games were wrongly removed from indie hosting site Game Jolt after a policy change labelled them ‘porn games’. They were later reinstated but not before a good dollop of snarky tweets and GIFs from the site. Game Jolt later admitted it “messed up” and apologised to creators. ■ **MT**



“Build 41 makes the game a bit more approachable and visually appealing for players who tended to have avoided us in favour of more immersive FPS experiences,” says Simpson.

that if we could stick the landing and deliver non-broken multiplayer that we’d get a bigger spike of interest.”

Project Zomboid also hits a sweet spot for streamers who enjoy role-playing games, with its multiplayer survival simulation a perfect fit. “We’ve seen a massive spike in interest in watching this kind of stuff on Twitch, with *GTA RP* being a huge thing where people love to watch their favourite streamers playing characters in serverwide stories,” says Simpson.

At the time of writing, 31,000 people are watching *Project Zomboid* streams on Twitch: not bad for a game that’s still in Early Access. It’s clear when you read over The Indie Stone’s blogs and forum posts that this is a studio with a passion project. You don’t spend this much time on a game unless there’s a lot of love there.

Project Zomboid’s sudden explosion in popularity is remarkable and somewhat unprecedented. This is an 11-year-old indie game which has received constant support and updates over that time, and has suddenly found a much wider audience: it’s both testament to the dedication of its developers, and the community that’s supported and enabled the studio over this long stretch. And, undeniably, a vindication – this is clearly a game with something special.

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Catholic tastes

The Vatican played the *Undertale* song ‘Megalovania’ as jugglers performed in front of the pope.

Direct line To Hell

Someone rigged up id’s *Doom* to be played via rotary telephone.

Cheaters never prosper

Tencent is winning massive payouts from companies that sell cheating software.

Final Fanta-NFT

Square Enix president Yosuke Matsuda is the latest exec to drink the NFT Kool Aid.

GPU what?

Stolen EVGA GeForce RTX 30-series cards have now turned up... in mining rigs sold from Vietnam.

Norton my watch

Norton antivirus is now installing Ethereum crypto-mining software on users’ machines.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

A According to veteran leaker Tom Henderson, the next *Call of Duty* – widely believed to be *Modern Warfare 2*, the sequel to the 2019 reboot – will release this October, one month earlier than previous games in the annual series. This, Henderson claims, is due to lower than expected sales of last year's *Call of Duty Vanguard*. And this, readers, is just the first of many rumours you'll find in The Spy's rapid-fire tour through the dark nooks of PC gaming leaks and rumours. Just like always!

That's right. If you're thinking that The Spy – attempting to renew The Spy's contract for the first time in a decade and hoping that PC Gamer's editorial team has never actually bothered to read this column before – is making a desperate attempt to look relevant and professional, then clearly you're just not very observant. This is how The Spy always does things around here. Look: per Jeff Grubb, *Star Wars: Jedi Fallen Order 2* could be revealed before this year's E3. See, not a paragraph will end before a fresh rumour has been driven through your eyes. That's The Spy guarantee.

Other less efficient and valuable rumour columnists might go on a lengthy tangent about current events as they relate to espionage or other stealth-adjacent activities, but The Spy understands the importance of getting the most out of a magazine

page. Someone – it literally doesn't matter who – is claiming that *Red Dead Redemption 2* will get a patch this year. Imagine! A major game with a live service component being patched! That's what The Spy loves: no wheat, no chaff, just PC gaming rumours. It's what The Spy is – and has always been – about. You know this, of course, which is why there's no reason to dig out any back issues and check. It's just business as usual over here.

SHOCKING DEVELOPMENTS

Wow, already three rumours down and we're barely halfway through. How does The Spy do it each month? The Spy literally doesn't know. A new report from Bloomberg's Jason Schreier claims that *BioShock* creator Ken Levine's next game is in "development hell", citing numerous reboots and changes in direction. The game, still unnamed, has been in development at Levine's Ghost Story Games for the last eight years. The report paints Levine as a "flawed manager", with former employees complaining about a lack of clear communication leading to burnout among the team.

According to one employee, when asked by the team how long Take-Two would fund their experiments, Levine said the studio was a "rounding error" for the *GTA* publisher – essentially implying that they were in no hurry to produce a game because their costs were such a marginal part of the wider company's balance sheet. That doesn't seem like a great way to view a studio full of employees who want to build and work towards a finished product. It is, however, a great way to view The Spy, who is absolutely worth the price of having a magazine page The Spy's editors don't need to think about – or even read – delivered to them each month.

FromSoftware is sending out surveys and screenshots of a new mech combat game, according to a Resetera thread that includes screengrabs of both, prompting speculation that a new *Armored Core* is in the works. That's five whole rumours on one page, which, of course, is what The Spy always brings to the table. What a waste of time it would be to even verify that. ■
The Spy

FALLEN ORDER 2 COULD BE REVEALED BEFORE THIS YEAR'S E3



THE SPY
The Spy is all business, minimum pleasure.

This month in... 2012



1 "Ubisoft want to do something different with their third free-roaming shooter," says Rich McCormick in this month's cover feature, "and as our unhinged friend Vaas would say, shit has definitely changed." It's easy to forget how different it felt, given that *Far Cry 3* would go on to define the template for the series across the next decade.

ISSUE
237, March 2012
ON THE COVER
Far Cry 3
IN THE CINEMAS
The Woman in Black



2 "From what IO have shown so far, *Absolution's* level design is sniper rifle-focused rather than machine gun-expansive," says our *Hitman* preview.

3 A cynical person might suggest that this month's giant tips feature was the natural result of this being the first issue made after returning from the Christmas break. But looking through, there's plenty of good stuff here: advice, strategies, and some detailed graphs and diagrams for some of the biggest PC games of the day.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Lara's mapping bunker. Either that, or a shot from *TR: War Of The Worlds*.

LOST CIVILIZATION

The community creating classic **TOMB RAIDER** adventures in 2021

The '90s Lara Croft still lives. While Crystal Dynamics reinvented Lara as Girl Rambo, dedicated fans are keeping her original lycra-clad incarnation fighting fit thanks to the editing tools included in 2001's *Tomb Raider V: Chronicles*. Community hub TRLE.net hosts over 3,000 new adventures to play added over the years, many full-length games packed with fresh environments and enemies.

For more than 20 years fans have been mastering and refining *Chronicles*' tools, which let you export standalone games for easy sharing. *Tomb Raider*'s 25th anniversary has brought out the very best, though even 2021's most notable releases are still just a sampling from a vast vault of treasures.

Movement At The Monastery by Australian developer Lochie is an example of what 'classic' *Tomb Raider* looks like today. Challenging even for veteran players, Lara is invited on a surreal adventure through a titanic Tibetan monastery, a single structure holding dozens of challenges, sidequests, and secrets, capped off with a spectacular cinematic finale.

Lochie got into *Tomb Raider* editing as a teen. Now 36, he has grown appropriately meditative on the process. "It's like a creative purge, you get to write a story, design

and detail rooms, add music, sound, and cameras, and even scripting if you so choose, and you only have to take on as much of these things as you can bother with," he says. It's not all relaxation, as he adds, "At some point the level starts to own you and before you know it you have to finish the damn thing so you can go back outside and get your life back in order."

MOD NATION

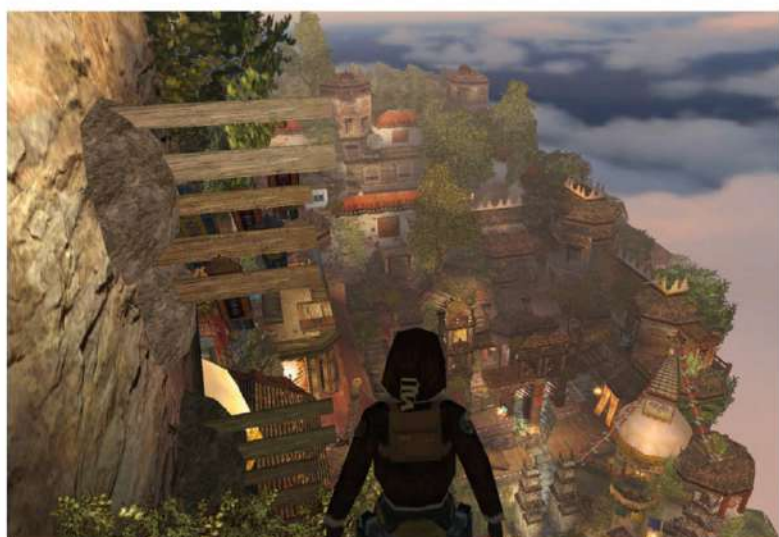
Lochie tells me *MatM* started out as a small lockdown project, using in-game objects like rolling boulders to act as internal timers for mechanisms. Limitations led to exploring the deeper end of the editing suite. "I stumbled into scripting and also discovered how to use conditional triggers. The complexity of things was able to be ramped up a few notches. I got a bit carried away then – I was in a kind of creative heaven. The sky had opened up and only the game breaking bugs would bring me back down to earth from time to time."

While more of a creator than a player, Lochie (and all of the other creators I interviewed) recommended 2011's *Mists Of Avalon: Part 1* as a must-play TRLE project. It has a sequel in the works, too, which will hopefully be released this year. Lochie has a high concept for what to make next as well: a time loop adventure that is inspired by Mobius Digital's *Outer Wilds*.



Cursed Treasures?

The many tweaks to the *Tomb Raider* engine the fans have made over the years are not without their trade offs. One persistent issue is that many virus scanners (including Windows Security) may falsely identify TRLE game exe files as infected and quarantine them. It's safe to Tell your scanner to cool it and put your files back where they belong.



FAR LEFT: The view from above reveals but a fraction of this maze-like monastery.

LEFT: Not the most auspicious start for a submarine mission.

PRICELESS ARTIFACTS *More must-play picks from 2021's bumper Tomb Raider crop*



WAR OF THE WORLDS BY MATEUSZ DZIECIOL
A cinematic, lengthy game pushing the engine to its limits.



BIOHAZARD BY BRADLEY SMY
Give Lara a T-Virus shot in the arm. Spooky mansions, limited ammo, and zombies define this full-length game.



FANTOME BY DELCA
Created for a community jam using only classic *TR* assets. A focused aquatic adventure reimagining parts of *TR 2*.



LEGACY OF ODA NOBUNAGA BY LEIF MELLES
A scenic, ninja-infested Japanese trip fusing old and new.

More accessible for returning and fresh players is *Premonition*. It eschews crumbling ruins in favour of Lara exploring in and around a sunken Russian submarine. It is incredibly haunted. The relatively small physical space of the submarine becomes increasingly flooded and cursed over time, giving it the sense of being a non-linear hub, even if progression is relatively straightforward.

Developer Luis 'LOTRKingluis' Cupido of Portugal is a second-generation *TR* fan. "I've always loved *Tomb Raider* games since a very early age, most of it thanks to my dad's love for the games as well," he says. "My first *Tomb Raider* game was *Chronicles*, and I found out about the TRLE community when I was 13 years old, around 2010."

He explains that even a relatively classic project like *Premonition* requires a huge set of tools and community assets to put together. "Roomedit for level building, Wadmerger for adding objects, Strpix for textures, Ng-Center for Scripting, Metasequoia for modelling, etc." Many objects and textures were made by hand or sourced from sites like Lara's Levelbase. All together, *Premonition* is the fruit of around two years of work.

HELLGATE LARA

What defined the TRLE scene in 2021 was a trio of spectacular full games, all years in development and inspired by survival horror. One, *Horizons: The Hellgate Saga*, is the work of Justin Brinner, who has been mapping for *Tomb Raider* since 2001, with this project dating back to his teens. (Look to the boxout for the other

two.) "I was 16 at the time, and I churned out over a dozen mediocre levels in a short period of time," Brinner says. "Some of these levels were part of a series I was creating called *Dark Skies*, the end of which was lost due to a PC crash back in 2003ish. *Horizons* is effectively my reboot of those *Dark Skies*. It all started as an idea in 2003 to create a set of fantasy levels, and evolved into a story-driven multiverse adventure."

Horizons opens with a dive into a *Resident Evil*-inspired zombie-plagued city, and getting bitten will cause you to slowly lose health from the infection unless treated. Soon it escalates sharply into a dimension-hopping quest across alien environments filled with new monsters. It's genuinely impressive all by itself, but also part of a planned multi-game series. A grand ambition, considering that parts of the saga date back to 2005.

Brinner considers the *RE* inspirations to be secondary in *Horizons*. "I've only ever played *RE 1*, but it had such a huge impact on me. Having said that, *Doom* is actually the primary inspiration, but we will see more of that in the second saga, as this first saga is simply a scene-setter."

This is just a taste of what the classic *TR* scene produced in 2021, and their plans for the future seem even bigger. These games play like nothing else today, and it seems that there's plenty of life in low-poly Lara yet. Dust off your best adventuring shorts and have a dig around on TRLE.net; you might find something you treasure, or even create a timeless artefact yourself. ■

Dominic Tarason

LARA IS INVITED ON A SURREAL ADVENTURE THROUGH A TITANIC TIBETAN MONASTERY

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

SOURCE CODE

How *Enter the Matrix* led Outerloop's creative director to **THIRSTY SUITORS**

It's a nostalgic time for Chandana Ekanayake, who spent much of his early career living inside *The Matrix*. He joined Shiny Entertainment at the height of red pill fever, when the studio was swept up in the Wachowskis' plans for crossover movies, comics, anime, and games.

"The first thing I got to do was read the scripts for the sequels," Ekanayake recalls. "They were still shooting it. The Wachowskis were very much involved and writing stuff for the game. It was an Expanded Cinematic Universe, before that was a thing, really."

Working as a character modeller on *Enter the Matrix*, Ekanayake was sent 3D head scans and photos of Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss – posed Christ-like in costume with arms outstretched for ease of animation. He pieced together red leather trench coats using drawings and fabric samples from Kym Barrett, the legendary Australian costume designer.

"We were trying to figure out how to get all of that to work on a PS2," he says. "The scanning technology is a lot better today. I'm just amazed, looking back, at the coordination. They were shooting the movie, and in between that, these specific scenes for the game with Niobe and Ghost, all on the same set to the same quality of filmmaking. It was phenomenal to be part of that."

The flipside of this Faustian bargain was a brutal Hollywood deadline: *Enter the Matrix* had to come out as *The Matrix Reloaded* arrived in cinemas. In fact, Shiny had much less lead time than the Wachowskis – submitting the game for console certification and disc manufacture months beforehand. "We would build a character or do a set, then send it off to the Wachowskis, who were in the

middle of shooting two films in Australia, and then it had to be approved by Warner Brothers, and then our publisher Atari," Ekanayake says. "We crunched a lot."

The pressure eased on the follow-up, *Path of Neo*. With no movie release date to match and the Wachowskis still heavily involved, Shiny had space to flex a little. Ekanayake became art director, and helped animate the YouTube-famous cutscene that precedes the final boss battle. It's the one in which pixelated Wachowskis explain why they've replaced a key character's martyrdom with a scaled-up Mega-Smith showdown.

DROUGHTS 'N' BOUTS

"That was a really fun project to work on," Ekanayake says. "It made me think about games from the perspective of cinematography. That really got me into telling more stories." Ultimately, it led him to direct *Thirsty Suitors* – the game Outerloop revealed at The Game Awards in December with a brilliantly daft trailer.

Set in small town Washington and rooted in the home of a South Asian family, *Thirsty Suitors* is a relationship drama about reconciling with your exes. It's personal for Ekanayake, who moved from Sri Lanka to the United States aged eight. But its turn-based battles are anything but grounded, drawing on the language of martial arts to amplify character squabbles. Wronged lovers throw cars and backflip into slo-mo handshakes.

"Everything you see in the trailer is what the folks on the team like to do," Ekanayake says. "The over-the-top, Matrix-style animation is from AZO [Outerloop co-founder Aung Zaw Oo]. When we hired him for *Path of Neo*, he had a YouTube channel where he ran on walls. He still does."

Ekanayake draws a direct line from *Monday Night Combat*, the *Dota*-like shooter he worked on with AZO and Outerloop artist Darran Hurlbut after *Path of Neo*, and the comedic stylisation of *Thirsty Suitors* – an exaggerated approach that allows for Scott Pilgrim-style surrealism. "One of the exes in Scott Pilgrim, their superpower is because they're vegan," Ekanayake says. "We really like to play off real-world situations. And then when the fighting starts, the absurdity kicks in. They go into their inner worlds and everything's amped up."

It's a juxtaposition that leads Outerloop to ask itself some unusual developmental questions. Namely, "Can we make your mom a summon?" Cue a demanding parent towering over the battlefield in a sari, swatting a suitor with her shoe. The Wachowskis who signed off on the Mega-Smith would surely approve. ■

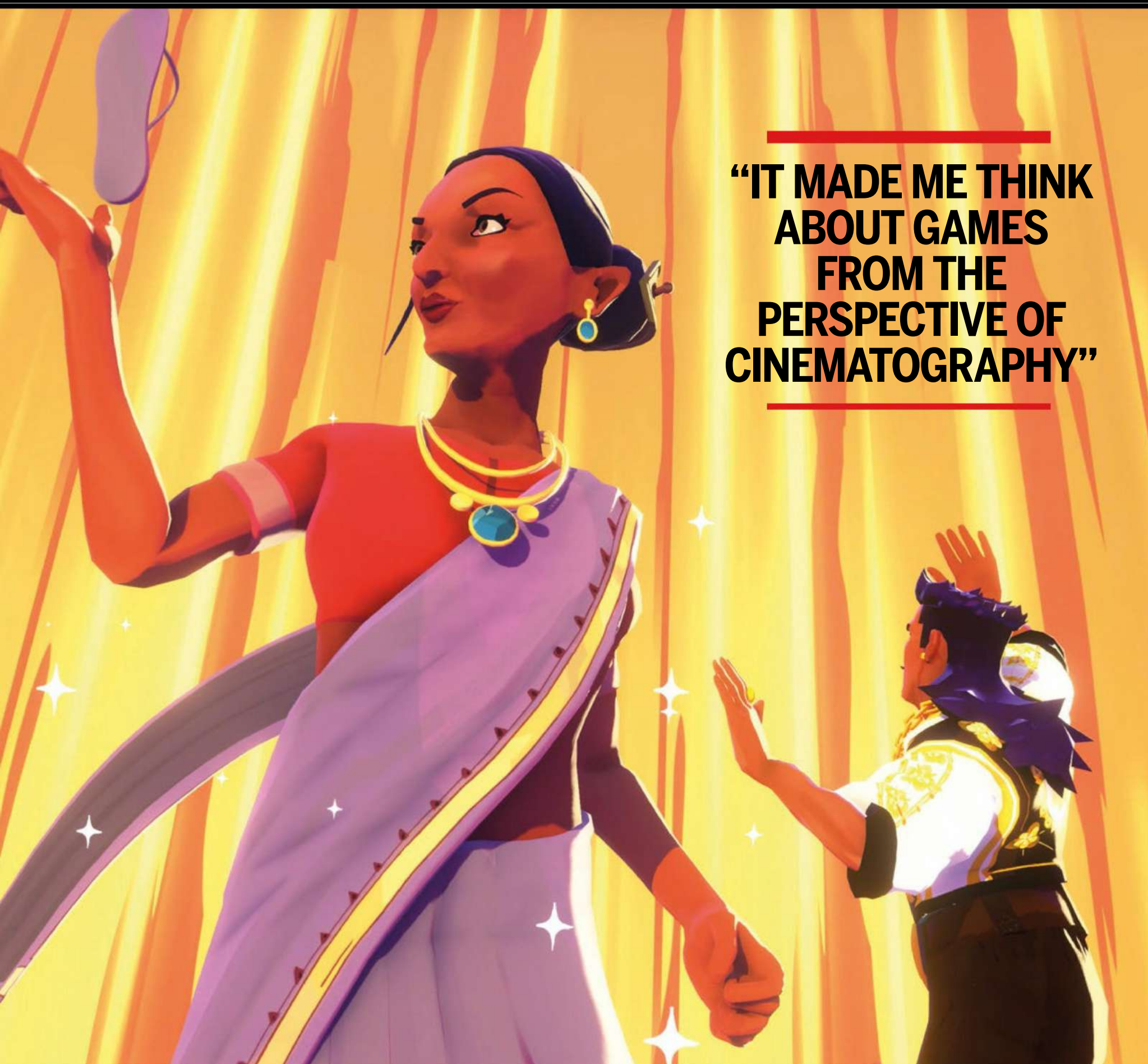
Jeremy Peel

WORLD TOUR

Some of the places Outerloop's remote team has worked from



1. United States
2. Canada
3. United Kingdom
4. Australia
5. India
6. South Africa



**“IT MADE ME THINK
ABOUT GAMES
FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF
CINEMATOGRAPHY”**



ABOVE: *Thirsty Suitors* has a wonderfully colourful art style.

FAR LEFT: “Let’s see how you like being frisked. Not much fun, is it?”

DNA Tracing

■ GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORE

“IT’S IMPORTANT
THAT YOU PLAY TO
THE STRENGTHS OF
THE STUDIO”

BATTLE WORN

How **DICE** redefined multiplayer, and gave up on singleplayer

At a certain point, a name like DICE becomes ironic. The Swedish studio behind *Battlefield* and *Battlefront* isn't famed for taking great gambles in the field of interactive entertainment. Instead, it's known for facilitating one thing: large-scale multiplayer shootouts. Nestled deep in EA's corporate bosom, it's in no position to be agile or surprise anybody. Shareholders don't especially like surprises.

The last time DICE took a real risk was over a decade ago, with *Mirror's Edge*. At the time, it was looking to expand its portfolio beyond *Battlefield*. "It's important that you play to the strengths of the studio," then-creative director Ben Cousins told GamesIndustry.biz in 2007. "I don't think we'd do a dancing game, for example. So we'd be looking for something fresh and interesting, something that's commercially viable, something that, if there's a gap in EA's portfolio, would slide in there – but something that fits the experience of the studio."

DICE found its answer by tapping into the international craze for parkour. It wasn't alone – in the following months, both *Bond* and *Assassin's Creed* would do the same. But only DICE recognised the importance of the POV perspective to freerunning footage; the one-to-one connection that provides the vicarious thrill of tumbling between rooftops. The studio had already long specialised in immersive first-person movement, and *Mirror's Edge* advanced the craft with flailing arms and sliding legs – on-screen elements that oriented and grounded the player in its platforming levels.

Initially, DICE had defaulted to designing *Mirror's Edge* as a multiplayer game, about cops and robbers – but by the time of its release it was singleplayer-only. One of its concept art characters became

Faith, a courier living just beyond the reach of an oppressive society rendered in stark primary colours. *Mirror's Edge* still stands out in the studio's catalogue as an anomaly – a rare piece of coherent, directed worldbuilding among thinly-sketched shooter campaigns.

EAGLE EYE

Oddly enough, *Battlefield* actually has its roots in a singleplayer-first FPS, developed by another company. *Codename Eagle* was a clumsy, kooky caper, released in 1999 but set in an alternate 1920s, in which the Russian Empire conquered Europe. It evoked *Half-Life* and *Medal of Honor* – though without the tight choreography that made both of its peers classics. What it did have was vehicles: tanks, trucks, jeeps, helicopters and motorcycles with sidecars.

Disastrous netcode and frequent crashes made *Codename Eagle* nigh on unplayable in multiplayer, but those who persisted discovered a sandbox for absurd Hail Marys – targeted helicopter crashes, or plane-bailing parachute jumps onto the backs of blimps. In short, this was the prototype for *Battlefield*, which DICE purchased wholesale with the developer, Refraction Games. Refraction founder Patrick Söderlund would go on to become CEO, and ultimately one of EA's most powerful executives – riding that blimp all the way to the top.

Battlefield 1942 fixed the netcode (though it must be said, calamitous multiplayer launches remain a regular theme for the series to this day). It jettisoned the campaign. It redefined the game around simple classes that served as prompts for co-operation – backing up a squad as a medic, or tending to a tank as an engineer. Once *Battlefield 1942* became a hit, DICE turned its back on a history of pinball and motorsports games to focus on its

NAME GAME

Let us explain EA DICE AB's complicated acronym

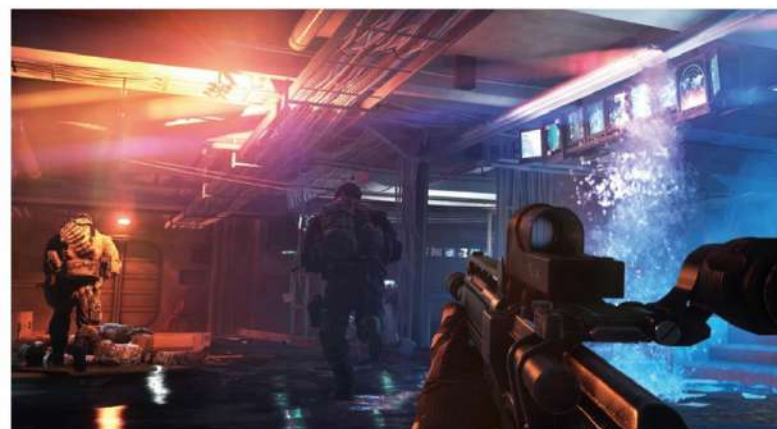
EA = Electronic Arts, the publisher which owns the studio.

DI = Digital Illusions, founded in May 1992 by four students at Växjö University.

CE = Creative Entertainment. You know, like videogames.

AB = Aktiebolag, which is the Swedish term for 'limited company' or 'corporation'.

FAR RIGHT: Blue and orange became *Battlefield*'s defining palette for a while.

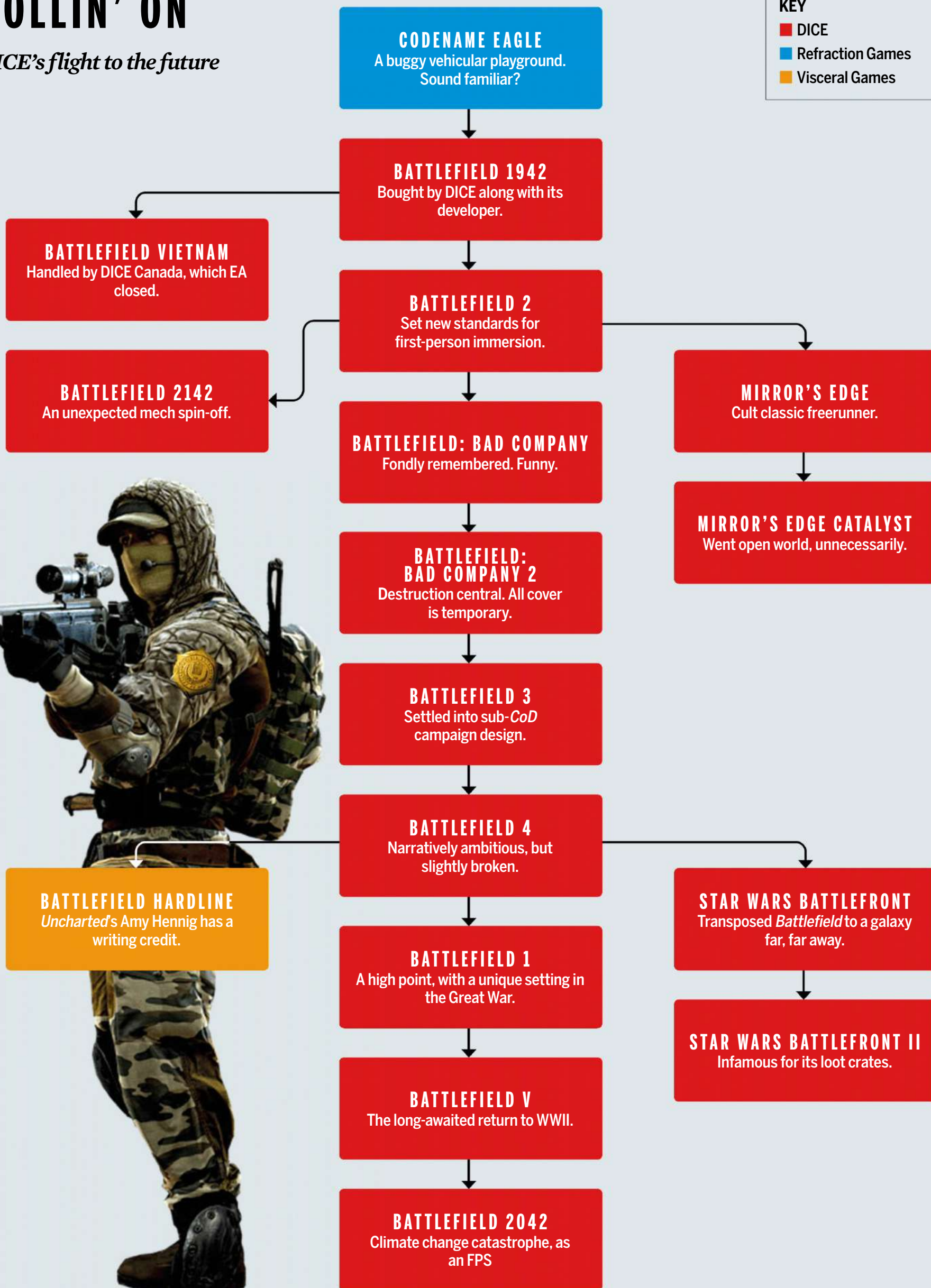


ROLLIN' ON

DICE's flight to the future

KEY

- DICE
- Refraction Games
- Visceral Games



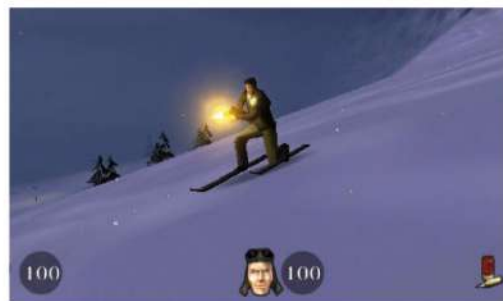
promising acquisition. In many ways, DICE never bettered the formula, even as it folded in cutting edge visual effects and destructible terrain. In last year's *Battlefield 2042*, the high points were still provided by the same feats of vehicular heroics that distinguished *Codename Eagle*. Unfortunately though the class system had been desiccated, in favour of *Call of Duty*-style loadouts – so teamwork has been sacrificed for battle-pass-friendly individualism.

CAM-PAIN

DICE has long been at its worst when copying *CoD* – sucked into an Autumn release rivalry between two major publishers. In *Battlefield 4*'s campaign, it staged a gulag escape – something *CoD* had already done not once, but twice, in *Black Ops* and *Modern Warfare 2*. DICE even coupled the player with a scenery-chewing Russian convict, in the mould of Gary Oldman's inimitable Viktor Reznov.

The upshot of this mimicry is that DICE's singleplayer offerings have often been suffocatingly linear. You can't deny that accidentally leaving the combat area is a *Battlefield* tradition – but it usually happens at 200mph in a fighter jet. Doing so on foot while attempting to find the narrow permitted route through a campaign is less thrilling, to say the least.

Latterly, things have got a little better. For *Battlefield 1* and *Battlefield V*, DICE adopted a short story structure for its campaigns that allowed it to jump between dramatically different spheres of combat, offering varied backdrops and doling out heavy consequences for its fleetingly-met characters. Better still, the studio has gradually caught on to the fact that its singleplayer offerings are most entertaining when embracing the jeep-jacking freedom particular to *Battlefield*.



ABOVE: *Codename Eagle* is where it all started for *Battlefield*.

AUTO THEFT

It's an approach exemplified by *Nothing is Written*, the Lawrence of Arabia story that closes out *Battlefield 1*. Playing as a Bedouin fighter, you undermine the Ottoman Empire by turning cannons, cars and horses against their owners – free to tackle objectives in whichever order you please, at whatever volume you like. It's the perfect thematic framing for DICE's most literal sandbox.

Yet even at their finest, DICE's campaigns have been derailed by bugs. Malfunctioning binoculars and enemies who watch through walls make a mockery of moments of *Far Cry*-esque planning and execution. You wonder whether, in the clamour for post-launch fixes to its

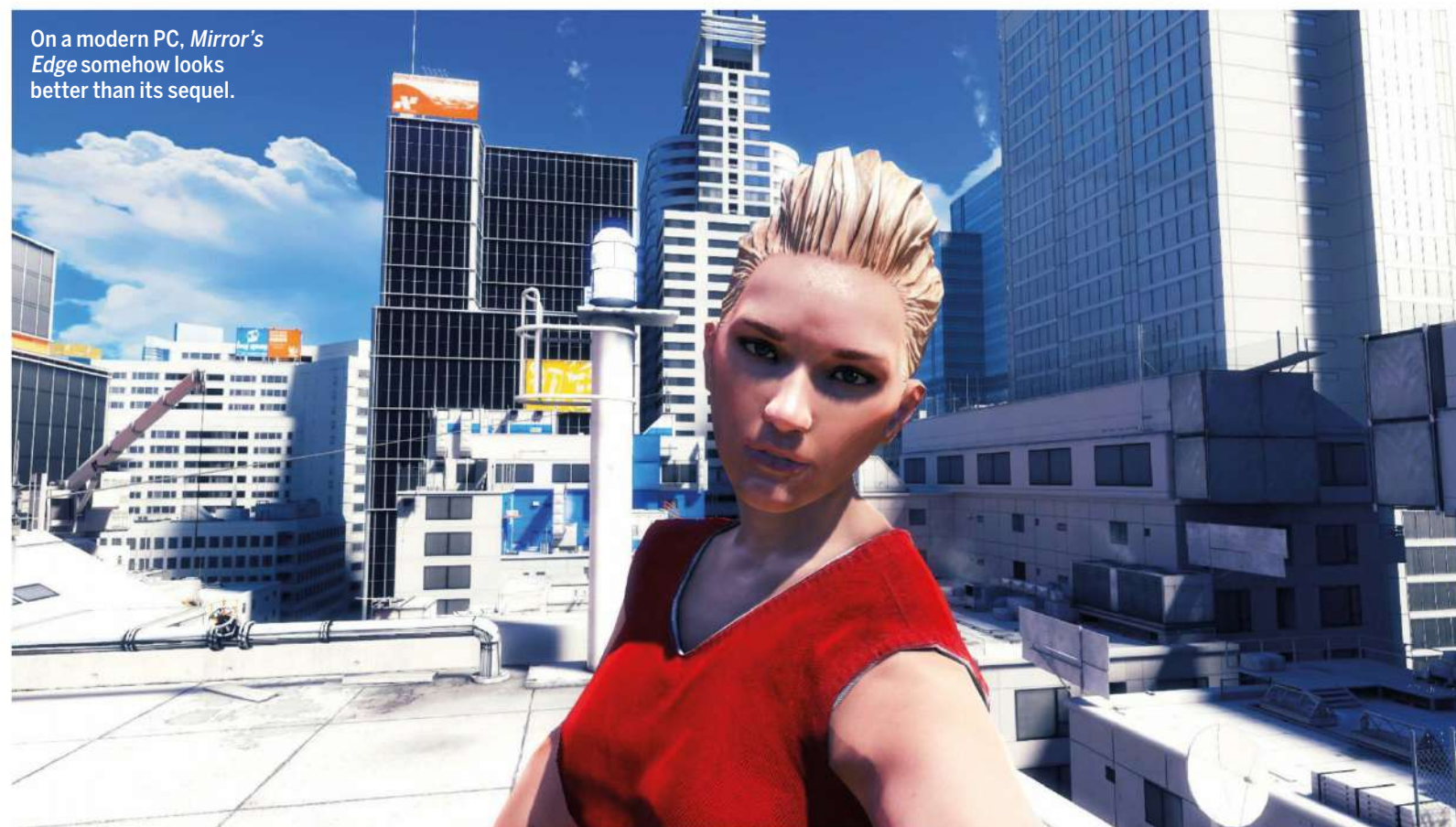
multiplayer modes, the developer has tended to leave its campaigns for dead – despite the obvious love that has gone into them during development.

Perhaps it was inevitable that DICE would trim down and focus on multiplayer. It did once with *Battlefield 1942*, and has done again with *Battlefield 2042*. From now on, storytelling in the *Battlefield* games will be handled by a new EA studio

run by *Halo* designer Marcus Lehto. It's a sensible decision, and DICE is a developer that's relied upon to be sensible. Still, it's hard not to look back at *Mirror's Edge* and think of the adventures that could have been. ■

Jeremy Peel

THE PERFECT THEMATIC FRAMING FOR DICE'S MOST LITERAL SANDBOX



On a modern PC, *Mirror's Edge* somehow looks better than its sequel.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 17

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/31Tqu03

THE SETTLERS

Building cities and burning them down in Ubisoft's RTS reboot

Growing an empire is a balancing act. Expand your borders too quickly and you'll be spread thin, an attractive target for enemy raids. Branch out too slowly and another faction will claim precious resources before you can. Get the balance wrong and you'll watch your empire burn to the ground.

In the beta build of Ubisoft's *The Settlers*, I've watched my empire burn to the ground a whole bunch of times now. This is the latest entry in the long-running city-building and real-time strategy series, which began way back in 1993 for the Commodore Amiga. There have been six sequels since, plus a number of spin-offs including a free online browser game. The past decade, however, has been a rough patch for the series. An eighth game was planned for 2014, but its closed beta was poorly received and the game was never completed. This new reboot has had some major problems reaching players as well: it was originally intended to be released in 2019, then delayed until 2020, then postponed indefinitely. At long last, *The Settlers* is now, finally, poised to be released this March.

CITY PLANNER

The only mode available in the beta I've been playing is skirmish mode, where in 1v1 or 2v2 matches against other human players or AI, empires share a landmass on one of two maps and try to conquer it while destroying one another in the

process. So far, I've usually been the one being destroyed. On the plus side I've learned something each time enemy soldiers wiped out my defences, trashed my buildings, and threw lit torches onto my warehouse until it was a pile of cinders. It's probably little consolation to all my dead villagers, but each of those flaming failures meant I did a tiny bit better and lasted a little bit longer the next time.

The early game is pretty straightforward. You begin with a handful of units at the edge of the map: engineers to explore and claim new territory, soldiers (some with ranged weapons, some melee fighters) to protect your turf or wage war with other factions, and villagers to carry supplies to wherever they're needed. Select buildings from the menu and place them with a click, provided you've got the resources, and draw roads to connect buildings to each other. There are sawmills to turn logs into planks, quarries to turn boulders into stone blocks, houses to produce new citizens, and so on. The centre of your empire is your warehouse, where your collected resources are stored. You can survive other buildings being burned to the ground, but if your warehouse is wrecked, it's all over. You can build additional warehouses at least, to give yourself a buffer – and you'll probably need to, if my performance is any indication.

PLAYED IT

SPREAD OUT

My downfall is usually that I get too eager for expansion and widen my borders too quickly. In *The Settlers*, a quick expansion is necessary because, while the starting zones typically have enough resources for buildings and food, the most precious resources, like iron ore, are a good distance outside the starting borders. Iron is needed for the blacksmith to create weapons, and weapons are needed to turn common villagers into soldiers. Not only do you need to find and claim those far-flung deposits, you need to do it before your enemies do.

That means expanding as quickly as you can – sending engineer units out to widen your borders, claim promising turf, and undertake the lengthy process of surveying areas for signs of buried minerals. At the same time you need to be building farms for wheat and windmills for

EMPIRES SHARE A LANDMASS ON ONE OF TWO MAPS AND TRY TO CONQUER IT



➤ grain, fishing huts and bakeries for food, ranches to produce donkeys to speed up the transportation of goods or to create delicious steaks that can boost the output of some of your buildings. (A full belly makes workers much more productive.) It's a lot to manage while also keeping an eye out for the other AI or human players. They're somewhere on the map and they're just as busy as you are.

Plus, the map is dotted with landmarks, special regions on the map like a wrecked pirate ship or a mystical shrine. These landmarks can be claimed if you're willing to send out your explorers far enough and capture the region they're in, and each landmark can provide you with an added bonus, like resources or valuables you can cart back to your warehouse. It's a real risk versus reward prospect, because you'll have to once again risk extending your engineers a long way from the safety of your city, but the allure of a stack of free resources is hard to ignore – especially since your enemy might claim them first.

BEST DEFENCE

The real problem with the engineer units is simple: they can't fight but they can be killed. Which means if you send them out on a sprawling expedition to find iron and expand your territory, you should consider sending soldiers along with them for protection. Not only can soldiers from another faction find and slaughter your engineers, but there are bandit camps dotting the map as well that pose a threat if they're blundered into. On the other hand, if you send your soldiers away from base camp to escort your engineers, who will defend your city against a raid? Again, the big balancing act common to many RTS games comes into play.

There are some useful defensive buildings like towers that can rain down arrows on approaching enemies, which work well for protecting your borders or important buildings. But to get materials to build these towers, roads need to be built, supplies need to be delivered, and the further from your settlement they are the longer it takes. And as has happened to me, your enemy may approach from a different direction, setting your town

ablaze while your towers stand impotently guarding an area with no threats.

RAZE THE ROOF

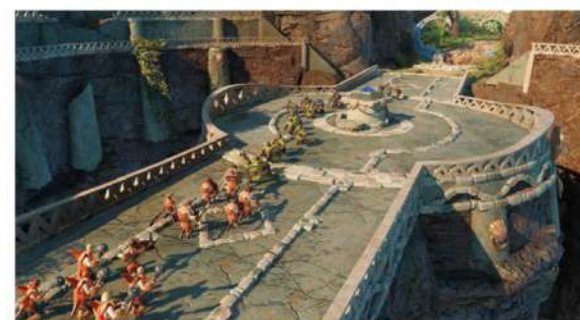
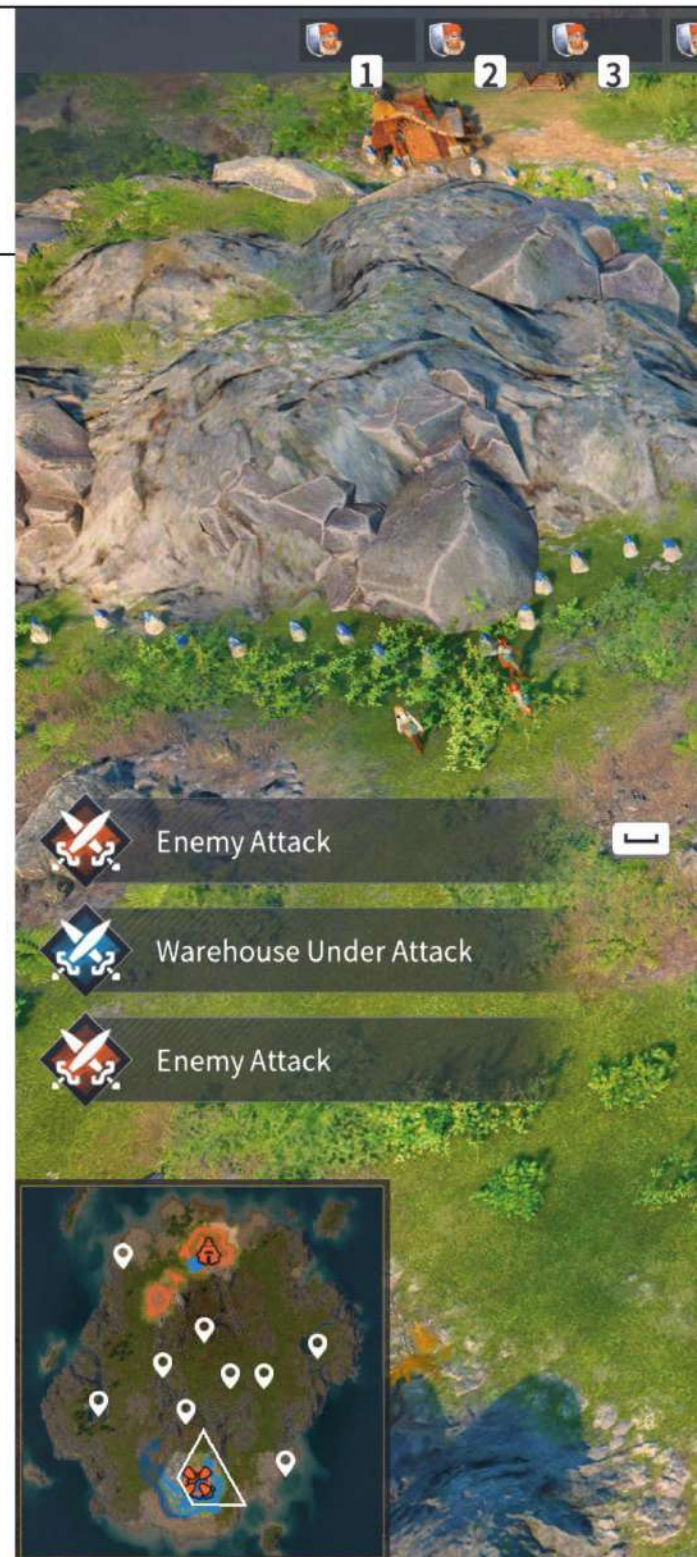
I finally found some success with a military strategy I like to call 'do what my enemy is doing, but do it first'. After a raid on the western edge of my territory, I placed two defensive towers and guarded them with soldiers until they were built. Then I sent all of my soldiers on a long, looping path east before turning them southwest again. When the next raid arrived at my towers, I ignored it and sent my soldiers deep into enemy territory. There was no army to fight because they were busy on my turf trying to burn my stuff. Rather than taking down my enemy's defensive towers or killing their engineers, I skirted around them and began lobbing torches onto the warehouse. Meanwhile, the enemy soldiers had finally destroyed my towers, but taking the time to do that meant they hadn't burned my warehouse as much as I'd burned theirs. Victory at last.

I've had a pretty good time with *The Settlers* beta so far. As a reboot of the series it doesn't feel like an ambitious reinvention trying to upend the genre – which may actually be a good thing. Not every game needs to completely rework familiar systems that players enjoy just for the sake of it, and for a Ubisoft game it's pretty refreshing to see there's no microtransactions or season passes. And a few things about *The Settlers* have changed. Rather than basing the factions on the Romans, Egyptians, or other real civilisations, Ubisoft has created its own fantasy factions this time around, and I'm interested to learn all about them when the full game arrives.

While I wasn't blown away by skirmish mode, it was a nice challenge and it required a lot of attention to juggle so many moving parts. But the hustle and bustle of building and quick expansion isn't my preferred way to create an empire. I like a bit more time to plan and manage and expand a bit more slowly.

So I'm looking forward to *The Settlers'* campaign mode, which unfortunately isn't included in the build I've been playing. The campaign will have a storyline, different characters and allies to meet, and different biomes to build in. There will also be an onslaught mode where players can use skirmish maps with custom settings like fewer resources or more enemies. *The Settlers* will release on March 17.

Christopher Livingston



Only a strong city can produce a strong army.



THERE ARE SOME USEFUL BUILDINGS LIKE TOWERS THAT CAN RAIN DOWN ARROWS



ABOVE: If you can't beat 'em, invade 'em.

LEFT: Smart building placement provides bonuses to other structures.

PREVIEW

Skald: Against The Black Priory



ABOVE: You'll find a few companions as you explore.

RIGHT: It wouldn't be a fantasy sea voyage without wreck by tentacle.



Skald: Against The Black Priory



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Scape-IT AS

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
skaldrpg.com

SKALD: AGAINST THE BLACK PRIORY

Teaching an old dog new tricks

Skalld: *Against the Black Priory* is careful in how it echoes the past. This retro-styled CRPG might seem hardcore, but in fact it's pretty approachable. Autosaves have your back, you can do almost everything using only the mouse, and there's even a button to automate the turn-based combat.

This despite resembling *Ultima VI*'s grimdark fantasy cousin. No, there's no virtuous Avatar here to dispel the forces of evil, just salty mercenaries such as yourself. In *Skald*'s meaty prologue demo, you arrive (shipwrecked) on an island to search for a woman with troubling magical powers. Said powers *may* have transformed the wildlife into giant, feral beasts and *might* have something to do with the cult of fishermen currently tearing the island apart. If I'm unsure, it's because the demo ends abruptly, on a tantalising cliffhanger. Still, what's here is reason to be excited for the Early Access release, which is scheduled for sometime this year.

Firstly, would you just look at it. *Skald* looks authentic to our memories of early '90s CRPGs, only with more muted and readable pixel art, and an interface that doesn't take up half of the screen. Those muted tones blend with the story, and the excellent soundtrack, to create an atmosphere of Lovecraftian dread.

It isn't particularly scary, but an engrossing place to spend a couple of

hours, and like the best RPGs is really a game about clearing maps. Or at least it is to me, the guy who scours every inch of towns and wilderness in games. In *Skald*'s location maps, you'll find chests, a few quests, and enemies to rumble with, though some more environmental storytelling wouldn't go amiss. Still, I enjoyed exploring the island, attempting to sneak up on monsters before finding another turn-based encounter.

SKALD COMFORT

You know how it goes. You take turns with enemies, moving party members and performing actions like attacking and using spells. Fights occur directly on the map, allowing the environment to be taken into account. Which it is – at least a tiny bit – affording simple tactical positioning. Not every game can be *Divinity: Original Sin*, but hopefully this aspect will be more developed in the final release.

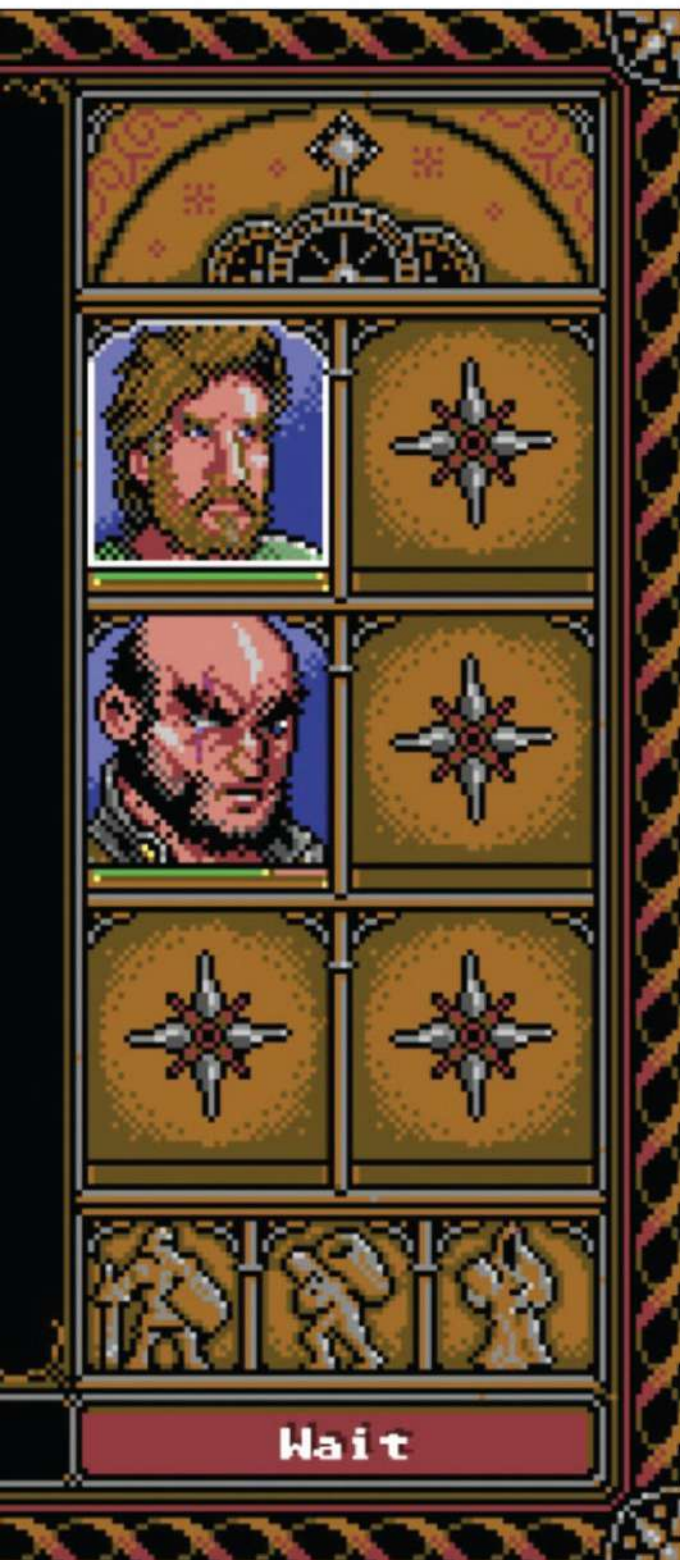
The most notable feature of combat is the option to take your hands off the wheel, engaging auto-resolve to pass the buck to the AI. It's a brute-force approach that tended to scuff up the party more than when I was left in control, but is it fast, and you can always toggle the feature off to quaff a healing potion.

I was not expecting to be so engaged by the story, which takes a sharp detour from the world-saving quests found in most '90s RPGs. It's a more personal mission, which gives your custom hero a backstory, and a believable reason to embark upon the quest. I'm keenly interested to see how it develops, and I can't remember the last time I thought that about an RPG.

In the full game, we can expect to visit a clutch of islands, and deal with a bunch of different factions, which for the moment are just names on an unused menu tab. The Steam Early Access, when it launches, will offer "90%" of the main story – missing only the final chapter – so there should be plenty to get stuck into.

Looks can be deceiving – they don't tell the whole story. *Skald* might style itself after retro games (and it's doing an excellent job of that), but with its refreshingly personal storyline, and its surprisingly modern feature set, it's actually quite forward-thinking.

Tom Sykes



LIKE THE BEST RPGS, THIS
IS REALLY A GAME ABOUT
CLEARING MAPS

I Am Jesus Christ



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC 2022

DEVELOPER
SimulaM

PUBLISHER
PlayWay S.A., In-house

LINK
simulam.com

I AM JESUS CHRIST

Are they making a messiah of it?

Yes this is more than a few trailers, yes I've played it (the first hour or so of alpha code), and oooh yes, I have some things to say. For the benefit of those unaware, this is a first-person save-'em-up... which is being marketed as a *simulator*.

Narration both during and in-between gameplay is mostly quotation from the Bible, and things start off explaining how God created everything, and then skips straight to the Joseph-free conception and Jesus Christ's subsequent birth. Cue a "30 years later" text screen, and then the game proper begins.

Incidentally, there's a specific reason that the game begins with Jesus at 30. This is the age that the whole preaching and miracles thing really kicked in for him and, in fact, he disappears from the Bible completely between the ages of 12 and 30. That's right, Jesus would not have qualified for inclusion in a 30 under 30 list of prophets and miracle workers. He left it too late to make any meaningful impact.

Movement works much as you'd expect in any first-person game. Jesus can jump, and he can sprint (comparing his speed to what is simulated in the average racing game, I estimate that Jesus Christ can comfortably achieve 30mph on foot), but there's no melee button. More complex mechanics are teased later in the demo. There's a health bar, for example, which at one point needs to be replenished by harvesting and eating

I ESTIMATE THAT JESUS CHRIST CAN COMFORTABLY ACHIEVE 30MPH ON FOOT

PLAYED IT

berries. They've given Jesus *an inventory*. And that's going to be a utter nightmare to navigate and manage when it gets to the loaves and fishes section.

The first task is to locate John the Baptist, which involves little more than talking to a few people until you briefly chat with one of his followers. With this done, you need to "report to your mother". I jump over a fence, bounce off a table and leg it at full speed back to mum to let her know what I found out. Nobody gives me a second look, so I suppose Jesus did this sort of thing all the time.

HEY JUDAS

In fairness to the developer, it has taken on a huge task by trying to speedrun the New Testament, and gamifying it so that it's enjoyable yet still respectful is arguably a fool's errand. So far though, it's infinitely superior to any edutainment (now there's a word that'll make anyone shudder) title I played as a kid. I really like the calming, chill soundtrack, and – while the dialogue's a bit stilted – it's nice to play something where everybody's lovely and polite to one another for a change.

The alpha playtest ends with Jesus in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, which is told through a combination of cutscenes and gameplay. Satan comes to tempt Jesus into sin, which he refuses, as in the Bible. *Unlike* the Bible stories of Matthew, Luke and Mark, however, Jesus survives without food and water by walking into *literal god rays* in order to pray, charge his Spirit, and then heal himself like an Elder Scrolls mage. As for the finale... hoo boy. You might think that a game where you play as a notorious pacifist would feature no combat. *You would be wrong*.

Angry at Jesus' refusal to worship him, Satan transforms into a glowing ball of energy(?) and starts throwing orbs of... something at him. The player, as Jesus, needs to reflect these orbs back at the prince of lies until his health bar hits zero. Getting hit, and even successfully deflecting attacks, depletes your Spirit, so you need to keep recharging it during the fight. It's extremely silly, but actually kind of fun; which sums up the whole package so far, really. No solid release date has been announced yet, unfortunately.

Luke Kemp





ABOVE: Everybody living in ancient Nazareth looks suspiciously white.

LEFT: God made dinosaurs, but forgot to include them in the Bible.

PREVIEW

Total War: Warhammer III



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 17, 2022

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
totalwar.com

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

Fifty turns with the series' weirdest, most ambitious faction

Total War: Warhammer III begins with a bear betrayed. The Kislev bear god, Ursun, specifically. Shot with a cursed bullet by the prince originally intent on rescuing him, the furry deity is now trapped in the Realm of Chaos, prisoner of the powerful daemon Be'lakor – the campaign's Big Bad.

From his prison, his roars of anguish create wounds in reality, through which the brave or foolish can make trips into that nightmarish land – to save him, to steal a drop of his powerful blood, or to demand a boon.

Like its predecessor, then, the Warhammer III campaign is a race. Everyone's trying to get to the bear first. It's a good excuse for some wars. Kislev, Grand Cathay, and the armies of the Chaos gods are all involved in the scrum, but there's another launch faction that Creative Assembly has been keeping under its hat: the Daemons of Chaos, led by the corrupted prince who nearly killed Ursun. In a series known for its experimental, asymmetric faction design, this daemonic horde still stands out as distinctly weird and ambitious.

After the mortal prince tried to kill his god, he was transformed into a daemon, allowing him to take a new form: all muscles and horns. But this form is fleeting, and can change over and over again as he earns glory for his evil benefactors. Ragnar – you can change his name, but I went with the default – is unique among Total War's leaders in that

his appearance is not fixed. Dedicating his achievements to specific gods unlocks new, hideous body parts and weapons, giving him bonuses and potent abilities, like summoning reinforcements or poisoning enemies.

FRANKENSTEIN'S DAEMON

Creative Assembly has been experimenting with gear for a few games now, but the vast number of ways to augment Ragnar is unprecedented for the series, and much more in keeping with an RPG. Many of these augmentations are themed around a specific god, but within these styles is a lot of variety. You can mix and match all this stuff, too, so you can fly over the battlefield wearing threads and limbs from all over the Chaos pantheon. There are billions of combinations, Creative Assembly boasts, and while I have no intention of trying to do the maths, there's definitely a bewildering number of options, encouraging you to make frequent adjustments as you try to counter the strengths of your opponents.

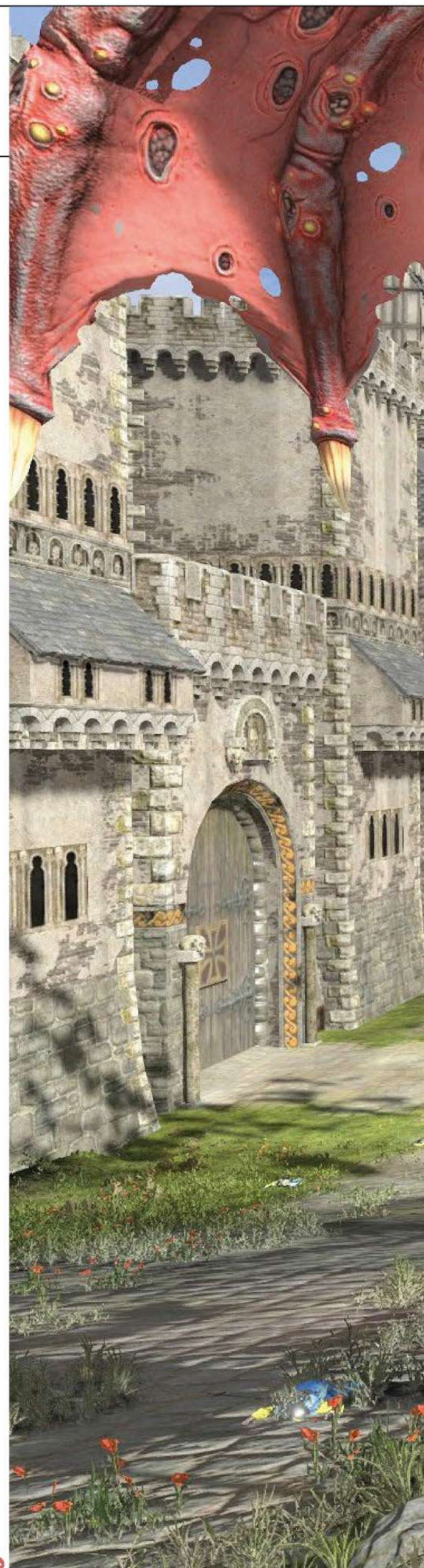
The Daemons of Chaos faction's other neat trick is also connected to the Chaos gods, as it's their rosters that Ragnar gets to recruit from. Instead of having his own troops, he can command Nurgle's pestilent monsters, Khorne's berserkers, Slaanesh's S&M friends, and Tzeentch's mystical bird-lovers. If you want the most daemons for your buck, this is your army.

Starting out in the chilly Norsca region, my little army was already full of abominations, but you can never have too many gruesome horrors. To get more, I needed to earn Daemonic Glory. Sacrificing captives, building specific structures, and making choices through events can all earn you more respect from whatever god you're aiming to please, which unlocks new gear and units. You can pick a patron god, letting you access their top tier stuff, or you can stick to playing the field and trying to encapsulate the broadness of daemonkind. This is what I opted for, though I found myself favouring Khorne and Nurgle the most: blood and boils, it's the way forward.

Like the Chaos gods, the Daemons of Chaos start out at war with everyone aside from the followers of Chaos. They aren't the most diplomatic bunch.

PLAYED
IT

THIS DAEMONIC HORDE STANDS OUT AS DISTINCTLY WEIRD AND AMBITIOUS





How does he keep
his massive
hammer so clean?

PREVIEW

Total War: Warhammer III

RIGHT: Slimer got super jacked.

BELOW: Slaanesh can't get enough of that bordello lighting.



Total War: Warhammer III

» Khorne's the least interested in words, though Slaanesh enjoys messing around with mortals and can manipulate them. I was surrounded by Norscan tribes, and while I was at war with one of them, I could forge alliances and make agreements with any of them, since they generally love a bit of Chaos. That also gave me another way to get my hands on some new warriors.

When you ally with another faction, you can construct an upgradeable outpost that gives you access to some of their troops. It gives more tangible benefits to navigating the diplomacy system beyond maybe having a mate help you out in a war, and it's a pretty good reason to come to their aid when they're in trouble.

I confess I felt a bit guilty whenever a battle started and I looked at my opponent's army and my horde of toad monsters, Chaos-infused motorbikes, imps and whatever I borrowed from my mates. There are so many ways to construct an army with this faction.

WORK TRIP

After 30 turns and well on my way to subjugating or befriending all the northern tribes, I started to stare hungrily at Kislev and the Empire. But *Warhammer III* had something else in store. Ursun roared, and the way to the Realm of Chaos opened.

Each of the four Chaos regions has a distinct map that's cut off from the rest of the world. Instead of capturing settlements and expanding, it's a perilous journey where you need to survive for long enough to get to the climactic survival battle. Unlike regular battles, you have to deal with waves of enemies while holding capture points, constructing defences, and summoning more troops. If you win, you get the essence of a daemon prince, putting you one step closer to your goal.

It's worth noting that the new elements introduced in survival battles do slip into other fights, like the reintroduced minor settlement battles. These scraps around unfortified towns have more texture now, bolstered by concepts from siege and survival battles. You can construct temporary fortifications within the settlement, for instance, and you can do so at any point in the battle. But you do need to control the area first by taking or

holding onto a capture point, putting an emphasis on the battle's objectives.

Nurgle's domain is where I decided to go first. Upon arriving, my army immediately started suffering from attrition, which is a big problem when there are multiple Nurgle armies waiting to jump you, not to mention the faction armies racing to the area's final battle.

KNIGHTS OF THE REALM

As this is a race, you'll want an army working through the Realm of Chaos at all times, which means dividing your forces for most of the campaign. And you're going to want to pick your best army. This is going to have a big effect on your economy, and make it harder to defend your territory in the physical realm. It's an extra layer of tension and complexity that I appreciate, but long-term I'm worried it might start to become a pain in the arse to have my attention constantly split and always be worried about attrition – and will I really be up for doing the same four boss levels again in future campaigns? In the early game, though, I love it. Tricky and tense and extremely novel, reconfiguring the familiar *Total War* experience into an epic journey – I hope that feeling does last.

Playing through these first 50 turns as the adaptable Daemons of Chaos was a treat, but I do hope it doesn't dilute the experience of playing the other daemon factions. When you can effectively play all four in one, the appeal of playing as the lonely Chaos gods is less obvious. Of course, they'll have their own unique faction twists, campaign goals, and starting locations, so they might still be up to the challenge of drawing me away from my customisable pal. There's more than just Chaos, too, and tearing through gormless warriors as Grand Cathay's leader – a shapeshifting dragon – is an excellent way to blow off some steam.

This is the most fun I've had with *Total War's* early game. Hell, it's the most fun I've had looking at *Total War's* menus. I spent a significant amount of time pondering what tails to stick on Frankenstein's daemon. Right out the gate, you're confronted with all sorts of unusual systems and spectacles, building your very own monster and watching armies getting crushed by a lightning-spewing dragon. And just when you're getting a handle on things – boom – time for a trip into the Realm of Chaos. Appropriately for *Warhammer*, it starts big and only escalates from there.

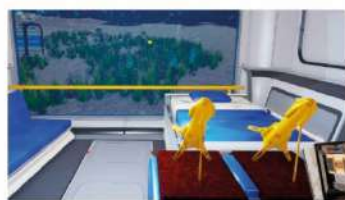
Fraser Brown

THERE ARE SO MANY WAYS TO CONSTRUCT AN ARMY WITH THIS FACTION



Who says daemons can't be utterly adorable?



The Planet Crafter

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2022

DEVELOPER
Miju Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
mijugames.com

THE PLANET CRAFTER

Excuse me, can I have a world?

Ordinarily, I steer clear of survival games; they tend to feel too much like a job, and I already have two of those. As for base building, the mere mention of it is enough to send me to sleep. This game, therefore, ought to make me physically ill. And yet.

In truth, the survival elements aren't so much the picture, as the picture frame. Starting off on a hostile Mars-like planet, there are hunger, thirst and oxygen meters to worry about; but the hunger meter goes down pretty slowly, ice to craft water bottles is very common, and oxygen is only slightly trickier to manage.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it (and if you don't, this will be a pretty short game for you), is to transform this barren world into a lush paradise capable of supporting human life. Balancing player progression and content gating is *incredibly* difficult, especially when the danger of player frustration is always peering around the corner. In the 'prologue' I'm playing at time of writing – which is essentially an absurdly generous demo – this balance has been managed masterfully.

Even with plenty of content to be added, the current version of *The Planet Crafter* delivers a sense of progress and ownership that no other survival game and/or base builder has come close to providing for me. There's plenty of wandering around to gather resources – something that usually irritates me in

SEVERAL HOURS AND LOTS OF CRAFTING LATER, I'M GROWING MY OWN FOOD

any game – but I never mind it here. There's always a goal I'm keen to meet.

BEST LAID PLANETS

Within the first 30 minutes, I have little more than a living space the size of a London studio flat, and an oxygen tank that starts to run low almost as soon as I start to wander away from my starting point. Several hours and lots of crafting later, I'm growing my own food and collecting water from the atmosphere. I have a little garden, a biodome, an ore extractor, and a platform I can *launch rockets from*. I've even built three nuclear reactors!

I think we need a new genre to drop *The Planet Crafter* into. In most survival games, the environment resents your presence, and works hard to eradicate it. Here, you work *with* your environment in order to benefit you both. Indeed, much of what I like here survival fans will probably be wary of, and there's still time for things to change. I hope they don't. Not all that much, anyway.

It's a very forgiving experience. Run out of oxygen for example, and you pass out, respawning at your base – with your inventory intact. *I love this*. Sure, it drains the tension out of common resource gathering, but it also encourages wimps like me to venture further, sooner. It doesn't remove the need or urge to upgrade your oxygen tank, as the rarest resources lie far from your starting point, and there are spaceship wrecks out there to explore and scavenge. That takes time.

There's nothing out there trying to kill you, or to tear down your hard-earned builds. No big alien spiders, no grumpy looking humanoids with laser guns; nothing. This is integral to the game's success, I think, and hopefully nothing will be added in.

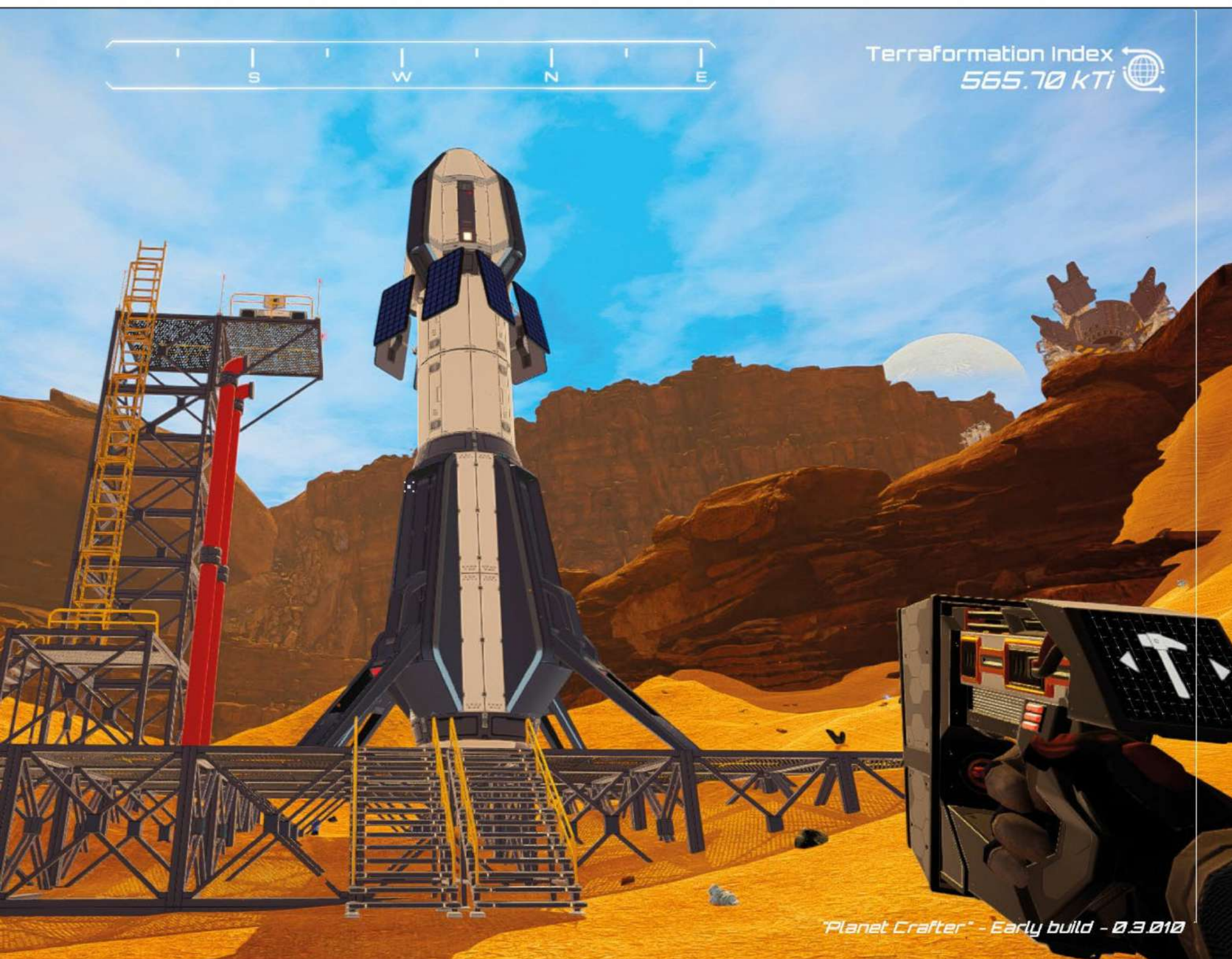
Slowly but surely, I change the nature of the planet by building machines to affect the pressure, heat, and oxygen levels. The sky gradually turns blue, and a huge smile blossoms across my face when it rains for the first time. Rain! I did that! Water then begins to pool in dips in the ground, and a whole new world of possibilities opens up. I can't wait to see what the final game has to offer.

Luke Kemp



Meteor showers can produce rare materials.





ABOVE: I've come a long way from crafting water bottles.

LEFT: Very sci-fi, innit?

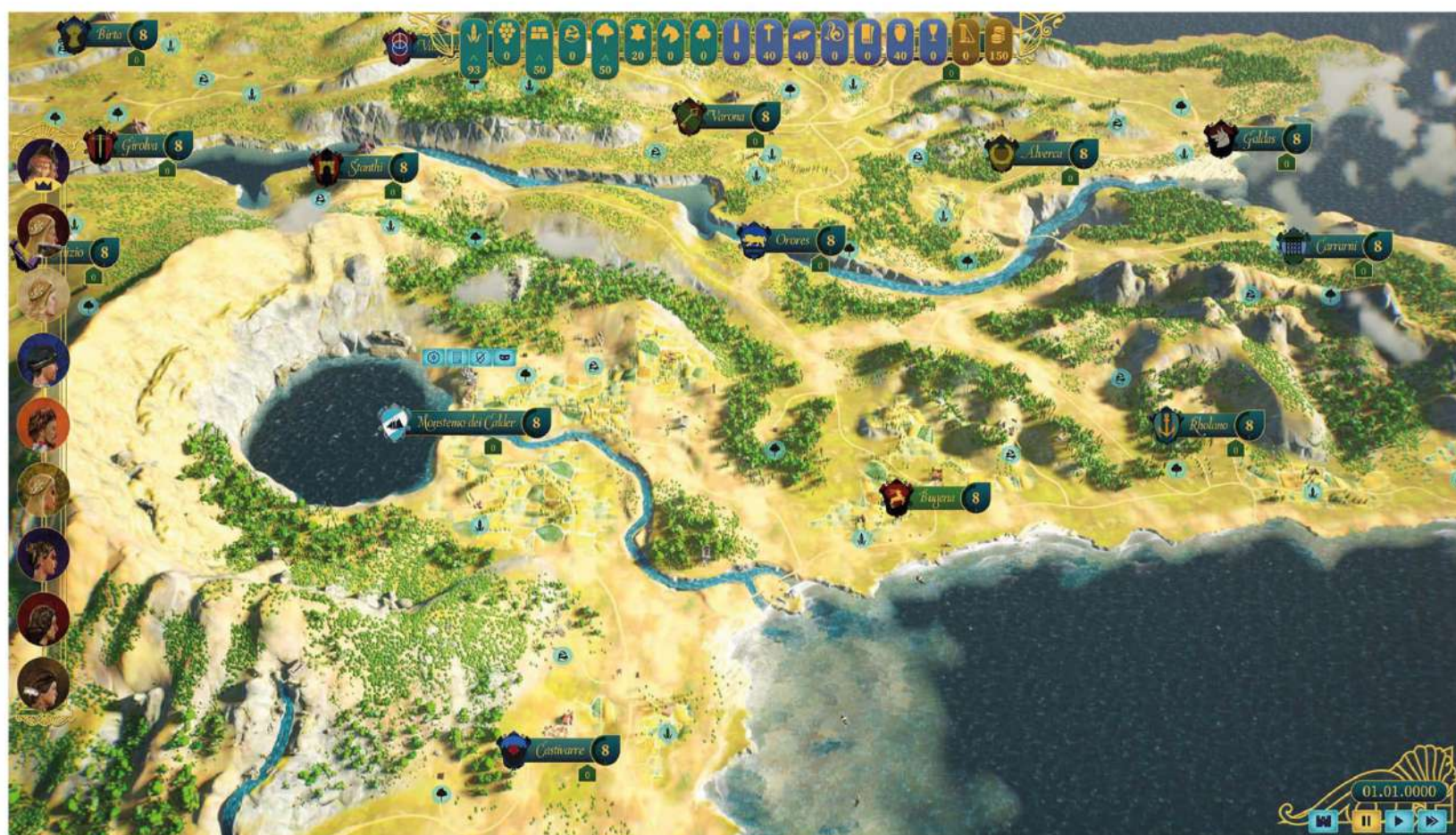
PREVIEW

Great Houses of Calderia



ABOVE: Members of your family may choose to go off on their own journeys instead of following orders.

RIGHT: In the endgame, the island erupts into civil war between the houses, for an explosive finish.



Great Houses of Calderia



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer

DEVELOPER
Resistance Games

PUBLISHER
Firesquid Games

LINK
calderiagames.com

GREAT HOUSES OF CALDERIA

Fantasy grand strategy that aims to topple the reigning monarch

The *Crusader Kings* series revolutionised grand strategy by switching the genre's emphasis from countries to. But a quirk of *CK*'s design is that you rarely know what those characters are doing. There's a gap between the social simulation and what happens on the map, meaning your family members can move halfway across the world without you realising.

Where *Crusader Kings* only gives you the highlight reel of your character's experiences, *Great Houses of Calderia* plans to give you the live feed. This debut grand strategy by Finnish developer Resistance Games takes the broad structure of *Crusader Kings*, but puts your family members directly on the map, tying your actions to their presence in the world.

"Whatever you do in the game, it will always be led by your family," says game director Jussi Autio. "If you want to trade with someone, you send your family members to lead the trade delegation. When you hire spies, one of your family members needs to do that. And when engaged in war, your family members will be the commanding officers."

FAMILY MATTERS

Great Houses of Calderia takes place in a 'low fantasy' world of Resistance's own devising, based heavily on the city-states of renaissance Italy, with 'limited' magic that manifests primarily in Da Vinci-style gadgetry ("no fireballs," Autio says). It's not as expansive as *Crusader Kings*,

taking place on a single island with around a dozen factions in play.

You also only directly control a single 'fiefdom', where you'll be able to build structures and produce resources used to feed and maintain your subjects' happiness, as well as perform special actions. But this smaller scale is at the crux of *Calderia*'s design. Resistance wants you to be intimately acquainted with everything going on across the island, rather than a tiny portion of it.

Autio shows me an example of negotiating a trade deal with a rival house. To do this, your character must travel across the map to that house and then negotiate the deal themselves. Their character traits will influence the success of this deal-making. "So if I successfully start a trade [deal], the resources won't teleport. There will be a trade route," Autio says. These trade routes are also simulated, and can be attacked by roving bandits or even hijacked by other houses.

As you only have a limited number of characters at any given time, choosing how best to deploy them will be key. If you send one of your characters to be an advisor in a rival house's court, then they're unavailable for local jobs. But you'll gain greater insight and intel into the workings of that house, and even be able to conduct espionage and sabotage on them.

That's tempting, because your relationship with other houses is a huge part of the strategy of the game. Any number of events and actions can bolster or damage your reputation with each, leading to vital alliances and unfortunate rivalries. Become too infamous and things may devolve into conflict.

These spats may take place on the literal field of battle, but it's also possible to have a war of words, engaging in social conflict through schemes, tournaments and viciously tense royal balls. Both take the form of a quick but tactical board game-like combat system able to simulate siege warfare as easily as the trading of scathing putdowns.

Like an upstart usurper, Resistance Games' has huge ambition, but a long road ahead of it to bring it all to fruition. Still, we've got high hopes for its Steam Early Access release later this year.

Rick Lane

FIRST LOOK



YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER HOUSES IS A HUGE PART OF THE STRATEGY

PREVIEW

Minds Beneath Us



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
BearBone Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/3K5M96x

MINDS BENEATH US

Dystopia ain't big enough for the both of us

The story begins in a hospital, with your character trying to fill some huge gaps in their memory. Oldest trick in the videogame book, right? Well, yes... but this isn't going anywhere *near* the path you think it's going to take. It has the unpredictability and surreal atmosphere of indie hit *Oxenfree*.

Although the demo provides many more questions than it does answers, *Minds Beneath Us* is already showing great promise. A hand-animated adventure game with a cyberpunk flavour, the aforementioned hospital scene starts telling one story before taking a handbrake turn into another, darker one.

Once your situation is clear, the fact that you're being asked to make decisions based on little or no supporting information becomes uncomfortable, and the consequences are significant. And then things take *another* major, unexpected turn, and you're in control of a new character in a new environment.

We're promised that your actions and dialogue choices will have significant effect on the story. There's not much room in the demo to show this, but the numerous smaller domino effects to be found are inventive and unexpected.

The writing takes itself seriously and avoids pretentiousness at every turn. There's something big going on, but it's lurking on the edge of your consciousness. It seems that unravelling the mysteries of this world will be a fascinating journey.

Luke Kemp

DIALOGUE CHOICES WILL HAVE SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE STORY

1 You have direct control over your character, but there's always plenty to interact with in a point-and-click style, too. In an indication of the game's attention to detail, if you find or pick up something necessary before you know that you need it, this opens up unique dialogue.

2 Despite the demo's limited runtime, it makes room for prosaic, human conversation. It's a futuristic world, but the people that we meet within it are grounded. So far at least, the story serves the characters, not the other way around.

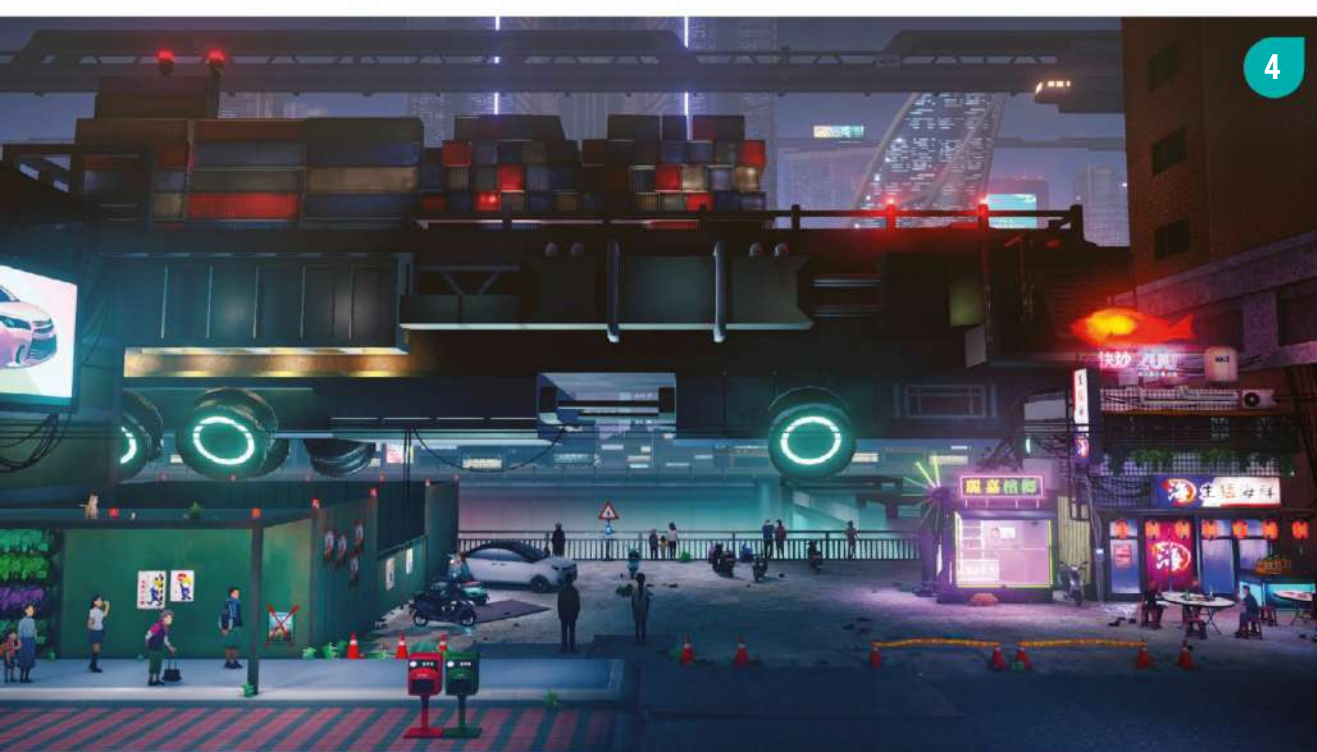
3 The interiors, and some of what we see happen within them, are just a breath away from contemporary life. Don't get me wrong, there is some *wild* stuff in the beginning, but it shines all the brighter thanks to the calm that follows it. There's some excellent storytelling on display.

4 It's only in the final minutes of the demo that we get a closer look at the city the story takes place in. It's unclear how much of the full game might take place outside, but it's a great excuse to show off the more colourful side of the art.

5 While you can sometimes take your time choosing dialogue options, some will only be available for a limited time (similar to the Telltale games). There are no pressuring examples in the demo, but the twists and turns of the hospital scene hint at a lot of potential.

6 It's a cyberpunk world, and the spoilers that I'm avoiding are related to some grim, dystopian technology. Nonetheless, the gameplay that's been released uses sci-fi elements sparingly, creating something that feels more like a world to explore than a child's playset to roll your eyes at.





Breakwaters



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Soaring Pixels Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
breakwatersgame.com

BREAKWATERS

Beach better have my money

Within my first 30 minutes with this game I'd punched the living coconuts out of a tree, nearly been killed by a rat the size of a mini fridge, repeatedly smacked a giant crab with a stick and eaten my own weight in berries. One thing this isn't, is forgettable.

Casually browse the website and Steam page for *Breakwaters*, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that this is a game full of huge enemies, naval exploration, world shaping, and customisation. While all of those things *are* present, none of them are easily accessible. This is first and foremost a survival game, and you need to work for everything that's on offer.

That's not to say that it's a tedious, overly demanding experience; quite the opposite. The glacial pace with which I make progress is partly down to the fact that I play during the pre-release beta phase, which means that the community (and therefore the pool of tips they have to share) is relatively small and scattered. This is relevant because most things are – at time of writing – poorly explained, or not explained at all. This will probably be less of an issue by the time you read this, if only because many more user guides and tips should be available.

CLOSING DOWN SAIL

The only ever-depleting meters are health and thirst. Very manageable. Each world is procedurally generated, but whatever it looks like, it's a familiar survival drill; doling

THE ONLY EVER-DEPLETING METERS ARE HEALTH AND THIRST. VERY MANAGEABLE

PLAYED IT

out violence to anything that moves (and that doesn't, too) rewards you with stuff used for building, crafting, or eating.

The scope of the game is impressive – exploring, fighting, and building are in effect treated as separate disciplines – and most things you do give you a little XP. So if you want to ignore the quest-giving man who lives under a huge floating exclamation mark, and concentrate on recreating Swindon on an island instead, you can; and you'll still (slowly) level-up and become more resilient. In fact, given the slow pace of the game, you're best off picking one playstyle and sticking to it (to begin with, at least).

The use of water is actually quite impressive. The tide will come in and out on the beaches, revealing or hoarding goodies and enemies as it does.

Harvesting the glowing yellow crystals scattered about is key to the experience. The shards are used as currency with traders, and the larger chunks can be easily refined into something that drives water away. See something submerged that you want to harvest or investigate? Chuck one of these things down there,

and Moses yourself a dry space to walk in. Conversely, refined blue crystals *create* water, useful should you reach the stage of crafting complex systems such as pumps.

The pace of *Breakwaters* is slow (did I mention that?), but it's much more forgiving than most other survival games. While almost anything alive will try to kill you on sight, it's easy to outrun danger if you want to. Importantly, I never came close to starving or dehydrating either, as on land you're never too far from something tasty; and on the waves, as you're not exerting yourself too much with the boat, your hunger and thirst meters only go down very slowly.

Despite clearly visible janky corners, such as awkward and extremely clunky combat plus some AI glitches (and an iffy frame rate – on minimum specs, anyway), it's already worth jumping aboard for the journey. It's welcoming for people who usually struggle with survival games, and something inventive and new for fans of the genre. It'll be fascinating to see what *Breakwaters* looks like when it reaches its final port of call.

Luke Kemp



You can sometimes harvest bones from fallen enemies. Lovely!





ABOVE: Mose(s)ying my way to a shipwreck.

LEFT: Online co-op is (probably) available as you read this. Exciting!

FEATURE



PC'S NEW GOLDEN AGE

There's never been a better time to be a PC
gamer – and the future is bright

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RISE OF THE MACHINES

The world of **PC GAMING** is more alive than ever – with plenty to look forward to. *By Wes Fenlon*

In September 2011 I moved 2,500 miles from one coast of the United States to the other, leaving behind friends and family for a city where I knew almost no one. For some of those relationships the move meant a huge change: I went from seeing friends weekly to just once or twice a year. But for others it was an easy transition, because we already spent most of our social time playing games together online.

In 2011 if we were conscious and not stuck at work, we were mainlining *League of Legends* like droogs with our eyes wired

open. We later had trysts with *Battlefield 3*, *Terraria*, *Smite* and *Dungeon Defenders*, all games we could pay just enough attention to, to keep our main focus on why we were ultimately playing together: to chat about day-to-day life on our homespun Mumble server.

We never lost touch or stopped playing games, but it became harder and harder to line up our schedules, especially with two time zones in between us. Then 2020 hit, and for the first time in almost a decade my PC gaming group was essentially my

entire social life again. It's been a hard two years in so many ways, but our Discord server has been a daily comfort – a place to vent, cope, and pass

THE LONG ERA OF CONSOLE EXCLUSIVES IS ENDING



the time with videogames. The pandemic has certainly taken a toll on PC gaming, delaying countless games and smashing hardware supply chains to pieces. But it's also reinforced for me what an incredible place PC gaming is in now compared to ten years ago.

THE NUCLEUS

Sony and Microsoft might still be slugging it out for a spot in the entertainment centre, but both have admitted the PC is too big to ignore. The long era of console exclusives is ending, with virtually everything now arriving on PC – and usually in finer form. We can play *Halo* on Steam without being tortured by Games For Windows Live, and Sony's crown jewels like *God of War* are getting PC ports with luxurious ultrawide and DLSS support for added shine.

Nowhere but the bizarre melting pot that is the PC could games like *Among Us* or *Project Zomboid* lurk for years before suddenly surging in popularity. The PC is now the nucleus of gaming culture, ground zero for new trends, home to Discord and Twitch and every esports outside of the fighting game community (maybe with *Street Fighter VI* they'll

Once-dead genres – like the 3D platformer – have returned on PC.



find the allure of 240Hz monitors irresistible). And the future looks brighter still.

2022 is poised to give us the Steam Deck, an affordable entry point to PC gaming that has the potential to open up our hobby to millions more people. We're still grappling with those hardware shortages, but they haven't slowed down PC tech's current hot streak, with Intel pushing a groundbreaking new desktop architecture, AMD killing it on performance with each new generation, and Nvidia pairing its graphics cards with irresistible

software features like AI supersampling. Even if you can't get your hands on new gear, the most exciting innovations in the PC space right now are helping games run better on the hardware you've already got.

PLAY THE HITS

When I think back to what kinds of games I could play on PC in 2011, 2022 feels like an outright fantasy. *Elden Ring*, quite possibly the biggest game of the year, launches on PC day one, while a decade ago Japanese PC ports were rare, late and usually

TOP: What exciting new treat at the *Into the Breach* devs working on?

ABOVE: Once a console mascot, Master Chief is now very at home on PC.

terrible to boot. For years console players lamented how 3D platformers had died off in the third-person shooter era, but there are a wealth of them on PC, like last year's beloved *Psychonauts 2* and even a reverse-engineered PC port of *Super Mario 64* (seriously, is there anything diehard PC modders can't do?).

For most of the last decade it also felt like the quintessential PC genre – real-time strategy – was on life support, but 2022 bodes well there too. We ended last year with *Age of Empires IV* and now wait impatiently for *Company of Heroes 3*, which feels

ALIVE AND KICKING

Remember when PC gaming died? We don't either, but people sure liked to say it was happening



2012
Mistranslations for the Modern Gamer writes: "The most recent blow is the announcement that *Diablo 3* will

be released on consoles... What *Diablo's* console debut means is that its developer, Blizzard, has left PC exclusivity, and that, internet, is a monumental blow." Nah, it wasn't.



Apple sells loads of iPhones. Hundreds of millions of PCs continued to sell every year, and sales even increased year-over-year in 2019. Turns out people like both computers and phones.

2015
Wired writes: "No, Really, the PC Is Dying and It's Not Coming Back," after fewer PCs are predicted to ship that year, and



2019
Marketwatch writes: "PC gaming is in a decline," arguing that PC games aren't good anymore, unlike

old Amiga games that "had only one goal: to entertain". And yet PC gaming is more diverse today than ever. The best part of this argument was the final line, "Hang in there. *Cyberpunk 2077* is just around the corner." Yikes.



like the kind of one-two punch that could wake up everyone who's slept on the RTS for far too long.

Hell, even *STALKER* is getting a sequel we never thought we'd see this year (it was supposed to be out in April, but slipped to a hopefully final December 8). 2022 is going to be a tsunami of a year, with waves of pent-up games delayed in 2020 and 2021 finally making it out. It's going to be a marathon from *Elden Ring* in February to *Starfield* in November, assuming Bethesda sticks to its release date. And if Team Cherry hasn't finished *Hollow Knight: Silksong* by the end of 2022 I'm moving to Australia and standing outside their window with a boombox until they let me play it.

The stacked calendar we're looking at now at the year's beginning is still an incomplete picture, admittedly, with little indication of what will blow up, what will fizzle, and what isn't even a blip on our radar. It's hard to keep perspective on how sprawling PC gaming is now: back in 2011, roughly 300 games came out on Steam in the whole year. In 2021, there were around 12,000. A pile that big is bound to contain a few big and exciting surprises.

TOP: Is a *God Hand* PC port really too much to ask for?

ABOVE: We reckon we'll finally get *Silksong* this year.

BETTING'S OPEN

BioWare has been playing coy about its next *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, but it seems certain both are coming. The long-awaited *BioShock* successor will likely come up for air this year. Rockstar, meanwhile, is almost surely working on *Grand Theft Auto VI*, and 2023 will mark a decade since the release of *GTA V*. I'd put \$10 down in a Miami casino that *Vice City's* coming back next year.

Those multimillion dollar productions live side-by-side on Steam with indie games, and today's indie development scene is so absurdly flush with talent that even a quiet week for games hides something tantalising. What are our favourite indie teams working on right now? Zachtronics bends our brains with a new puzzle game virtually every year. Our 2018 Game of the Year *Into the Breach*, from indie developer Subset Games, is now four years old, while Supergiant Games' acclaimed *Hades* will turn

two before 2022 is over. The next year or so seems like the time for both to unveil something new.

And with Sony now gung-ho about PC ports and Sega slowly coaxing its RPG studio Atlus into embracing the PC, we may even cross some more names off the list of holy grail ports. If we all do our Hail Marys before bed every night, dare we hope for a *Bloodborne* or *Persona 5*-shaped miracle? If I were truly

honest I'd tell you that the port I want to see most is a remaster of Capcom's *God Hand*, but some dreams are just too outrageous to commit to print.

BIOWARE HAS BEEN PLAYING COY ABOUT ITS NEXT MASS EFFECT

LET'S JAM

I hope 2022 sees Covid-19 wane and gives me the chance to step away from my PC more, but for now I'm content playing through *Gloomhaven* with the same friends I rolled into *League* with. Our reflexes and schedules couldn't survive in a MOBA these days, but the digital version of a phenomenal board game? That we can handle. ■

THE LINE-UP

It's set to be a fantastic year for releases – here's just a few of the heaviest hitters



Company of Heroes 3

RELEASE: 2022

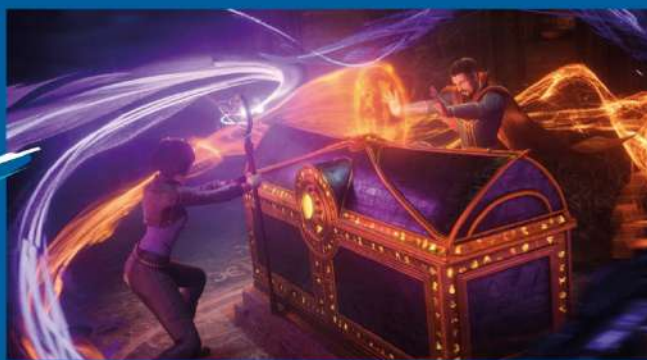
2022 is the year the RTS returns from the grave, as genre veterans Relic Entertainment bring back the iconic WWII series. We've been hands-on a couple of times now, and it's blown us away each time. It's a good year to be a strategy gamer.



Starfield

RELEASE: Nov 11, 2022

It's been a decade since *Skyrim* and seven years since *Fallout 4*. In other words, it's been a long wait for a new Bethesda open world, but 2022 is finally the year – and with its intergalactic setting, it looks like the developer's most ambitious project yet.



Marvel's Midnight Suns

RELEASE: 2022

You know it's going to be a good year for PC gaming when there's a big new release on the way from the XCOM team. *Midnight Suns* may be taking the strategy in a very different direction, but its superheroic skirmishes look no less compelling than the alien assassination we're used to.



Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

RELEASE: 2022

After years of lovingly supporting the excellent *Vermintide 2*, Fatshark is gearing up to launch its grand follow-up. Bigger, bolder, and bloodier, with a shift in setting to the grim sci-fi of Warhammer 40k, it promises to make this a year a great one for co-op action.



Stray

RELEASE: Spring 2022

The debut game from two ex-Ubisoft veterans promises a unique experience where you play as a cat in a sci-fi world.



Total War: Warhammer III

RELEASE: Feb 17, 2022

It's almost time for the biggest entry yet in one of the best strategy series of all time. Find out more on p28.



STALKER 2

RELEASE: Dec 8, 2022

For a long time it looked like we'd never get a new *STALKER* – but this year we're getting a sequel in time for Christmas.



Homeworld 3

RELEASE: Winter 2022

Nearly two decades after *Homeworld 2*, Blackbird Interactive is bringing us back to a galaxy of spaceship strategy.



Baldur's Gate III

RELEASE: TBC

Larian's fantastic take on the series is already out in Early Access and we're hoping this is the year it goes 1.0.



Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League

RELEASE: 2022

The creators of the *Batman: Arkham* games are back in the superhero saddle.



Kerbal Space Program 2

RELEASE: 2022

Getting to the moon first time round was hard enough – now they want us to build entire colonies in space!



Crusader Kings III: Royal Court

RELEASE: Feb 8, 2022

This first big expansion will be the perfect excuse to return to *CK III*.

PC IN YOUR PALMS

The **STEAM DECK** could totally change how we play in 2022. *By Wes Fenlon*

Apple isn't a bajillion-dollar tech juggernaut today because it comes up with ideas first. Apple didn't invent the MP3 player, but the iPod dominated because it had a better design, better aesthetics, and better ads. Apple didn't invent the smartphone, but the iPhone crushed its nascent competitors with better hardware and a brilliant touch interface. Being first never mattered as much as flexing those brand and design muscles to make everyone else look old and busted.

I think that Valve has a shot at its own iPod moment in 2022.

The Steam Deck isn't the first portable gaming PC, but it might be the one that changes everything.

The pieces for a sea change moment for the PC, specifically, are all aligned this year. The Steam Deck isn't just a promising piece of hardware. It's also coming out at an opportune time when PC gaming is out of reach for many people.

The brand power is definitely there: Steam saved PC games from languishing in the dreary dishevelled aisles of Walmarts and Best Buys, becoming the platform that even Microsoft and Sony use to publish their own PC games. The PC already won the console war, so why not go all the way and make the PC a console? It's been tried before, but never by a company with Valve's resources or name recognition.

PICKING UP STEAM

Up to this point, handheld gaming PCs like the GPD Win have tried to shrink the laptop experience down to something more pocket-sized, but it's never been an ideal setup. Windows isn't built for those tiny screens; the performance overhead sucks for portable systems where every ounce

of power matters; and who really wants to use Windows on a gaming system that's supposed to be pick-up-and-play simple, anyway? Getting games working on these devices has long been an arcane process of sussing out driver and compatibility issues.

Valve's near-monopoly over game distribution has put it in a good position to stamp out most of that fiddling. With Linux, Valve can erase the most obvious drawbacks of playing PC games on an OS that was never built to be portable. On the

Steam Deck there's no Windows bloat, no wrestling with an awkward interface. If Proton – the tool Valve developed to convert Windows games

to Linux on the fly – works as seamlessly as promised, less tech-savvy gamers won't even notice it. They'll just turn on the Steam Deck and play games. To them, the Deck won't be running on Linux. It'll just be running Steam.

That convenience is the key thing handheld gaming PCs have been missing until this point. And convenience shouldn't be underestimated. When Nintendo released the Switch, it managed to

draw people away from the places they were already playing games. Many PC gamers knew they could get a game cheaper on Steam, but opted to buy and play it on the Switch instead for the portability. Some games just felt right on the Switch's screen, played propped up in bed or on the go. The Switch was an ideal companion for a gaming PC, but now the Steam Deck can fill that role.

In one sense Valve is selling the Steam Deck at a difficult time – global hardware shortages already forced Valve to push the launch back by a few months, while graphics cards and some other components remain in critically short supply. 2021 was a bad year for PC gaming hardware. But the continued shortages could also end up being an opportunity. A £349 Steam Deck looks pretty good next to an £700 RTX 3060 someone's trying to flip on Ebay. Preordering the Steam Deck could mean a long wait, but Valve's Greg Coomer told me in August that, "It's our job to produce units as fast as we can in the highest quantity we can, so a lot of us are working on how we can make more Steam Decks. That has become our focus."

SWITCH OFF

The Steam Deck's biggest audience will still likely be PC gamers who use it as a portable secondary device, as a more convenient way to plow through their backlogs of Steam Sale games away from their desks. But if component shortages stretch on, it may well become a more attractive first or only PC.

And at least in terms of power, it's the Switch Pro many people were hoping to see last year when Nintendo disappointingly just

I THINK THAT VALVE HAS A SHOT AT ITS OWN IPOD MOMENT IN 2022

HANDS-ON

Games we can't wait to play on the go



SLAY THE SPIRE

OK, it's not really testing the limits of the hardware, but the Switch version has already proved that this enduring deckbuilder is the perfect game to dip in and out of on the go.



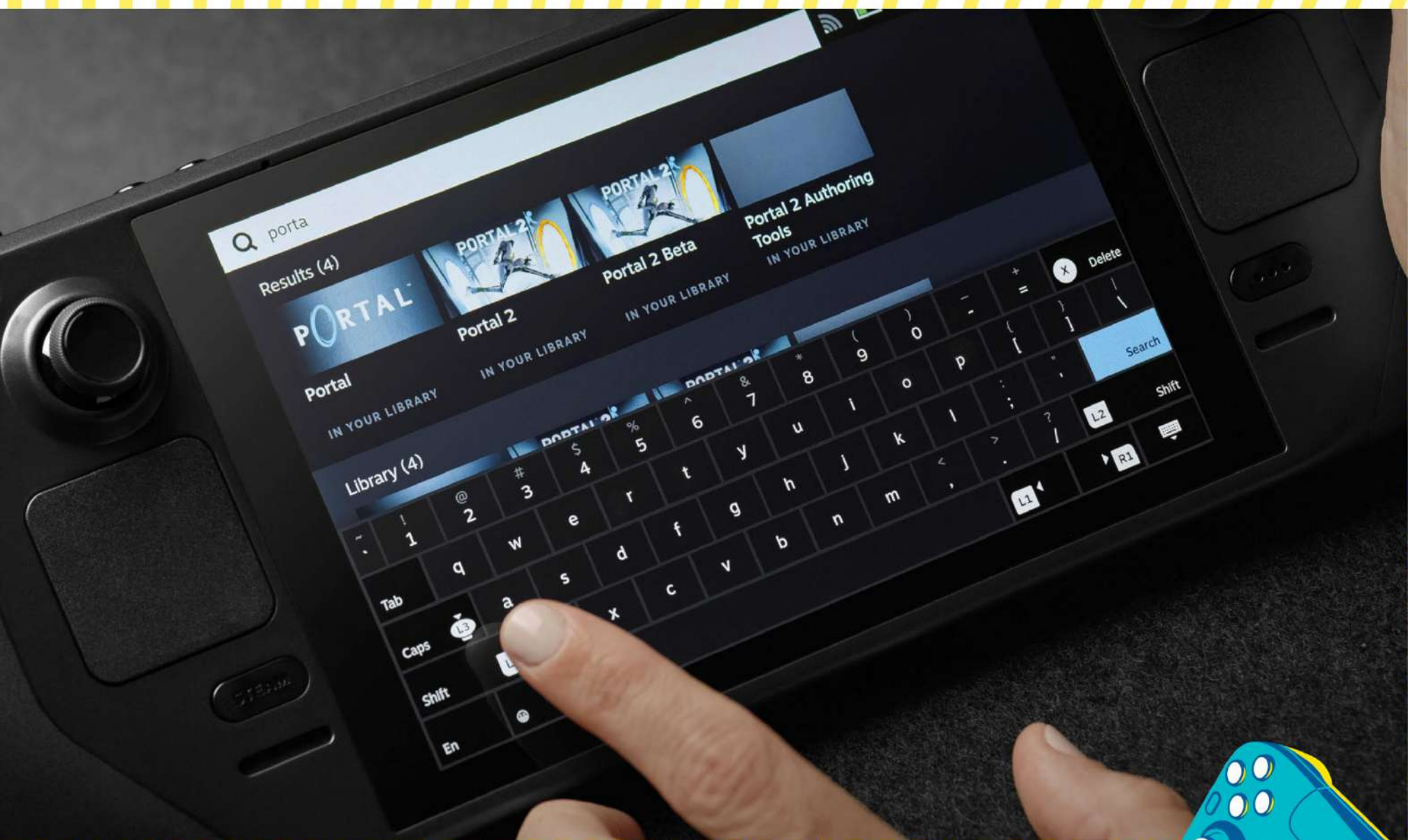
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

There you go, here's a test of the hardware. If the Steam Deck can run RDR 2 at a decent framerate, it'll be a game-changer – one of PC's biggest, richest open worlds in your pocket.



CRUSADER KINGS III

Will the controls be able to handle CK III's dense UI? That's still in question. What isn't in question is my desire to rule a medieval empire while I wait for the bus.



slapped a bigger OLED screen onto the Switch. I'd be silly to suggest the Steam Deck will suddenly outsell the Switch – raw power has never been enough to beat a Nintendo handheld.

Still, the timing is good for the Steam Deck. Outside of Nintendo exclusives, there's barely a distinction between 'console games' and 'PC games' anymore – most games today are released on as many platforms as possible. Steam's gargantuan library includes PC games from 30 years ago and Sony's *God of War* side-by-side. The Switch has primed millions of players to appreciate console-quality games made portable, but many of those games like *Apex Legends* and *Ark: Survival Evolved* now run at such low resolutions or low framerates that they're barely playable. The Switch cannot play big budget games released in 2022 without massive sacrifices. The Steam Deck can.

Maybe I'm overestimating the Steam Deck's chances. Looking back, Valve's previous hardware experiments mostly failed. Valve's play for the living room with Steam Machines was an infamous flop; the Steam Controller never caught on; its VR headsets remain too expensive to approach Oculus's popularity. But none of those devices really had a proven audience eager and waiting for them – or a pitch as strong as playing all your PC games on the go, without the sacrifices of all those previous handheld PCs. And the SteamOS software that held back

Steam Machines in 2014 may have matured enough to now be Valve's ace in the hole.

Even if the Steam Deck doesn't shake the foundations of PC gaming enough to pull most PC gamers away from their desktops, a modest success could still be transformative for Valve. There's never been a single device or brand synonymous with PC gaming. The Steam Deck could easily become that: the go-to PC if you want to spend £350 or care about portability, and the first in a product line that could bring more players to Steam. If 2022 is the year of the Steam Deck, then 2023 will be the year we see Valve's dabbling with hardware evolve into its biggest priority. ■

ABOVE: A lot of questions remain about the final product – but the potential is undeniable.

BELOW: An enormous library and cheaper games could be a huge edge over the Switch.



Intel is joining the graphics card race with its upcoming Arc Alchemist GPUs.



WHO NEEDS NEW GPUs?

2022 is the year where you don't need new **HARDWARE** for better gaming performance. *By Dave James*

There are two things we are confident about seeing in 2022. The first is that the silicon shortage will continue well into the end of the year, making graphics cards still the most sought after, most expensive part of any gaming PC build.

That's rather depressing, and I'm sorry to have to kick off the year confirming the ongoing technical torpor of PC gaming hardware. But the second thing we're confident about seeing is far more positive, and means that maybe we shouldn't care about chasing that ephemeral upgrade and love the rig we're with.

Because there are some things happening in 2022 that mean you're likely in line for higher frame rates and improved gaming fidelity from

your existing gaming PC without having to change a single chip. A little software update here, a patch there, and you could soon be enjoying better gaming performance for free.

That probably sounds like so much snake oil so far, but if you look back at the recent trends in graphics you can see where 2022 is heading. Sure, we've been talking about the most powerful graphics cards being released over the last couple of years that make the best of the last gen seem laggardly by comparison, but it's the accompanying rise in upscaling software that has arguably been the most impressive improvement of all.

CHIP SHAPE

Nvidia's Deep Learning Super Sampling (DLSS) kicked it all off, using AI and the latent power of its GPU's Tensor Cores to make

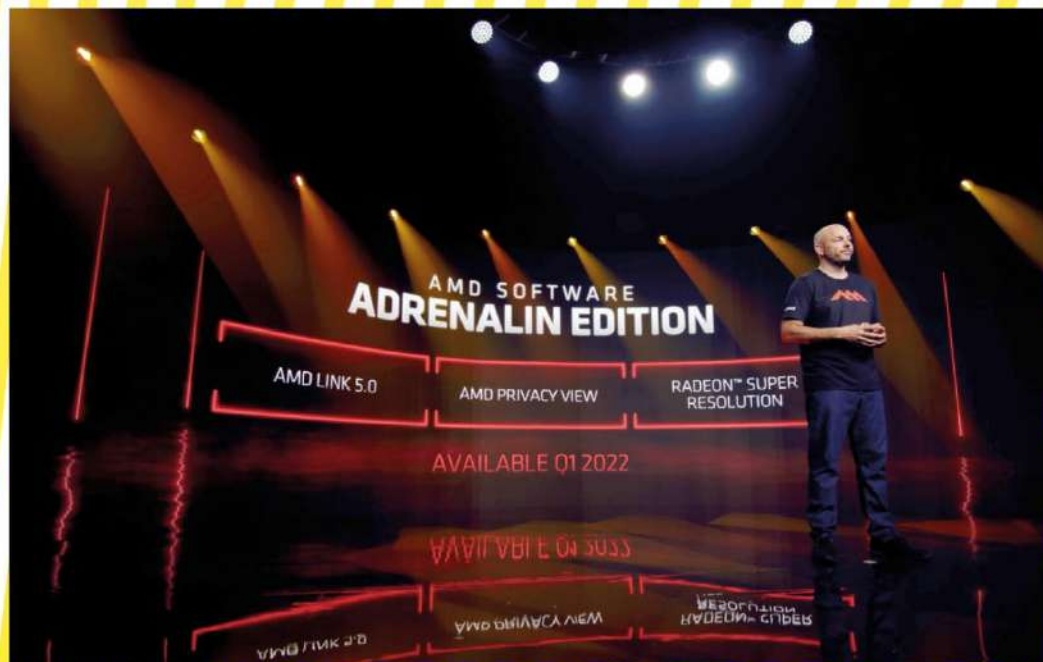
upscaled, lower resolution images look sometimes even better than at the equivalent native res. The green team has continued improving on the GeForce RTX-only technology, but AMD has not been slacking with its own FidelityFX Super Resolution (FSR) coming, not just to Radeon cards, but to all GPUs. It's not quite as high fidelity, but it will get you great performance without the necessarily muddy visuals of a standard low res game setting.

It still needs to be added on a per-game basis, however, but launching early this year is Radeon Super Resolution (RSR), a feature baked into an upcoming AMD driver release that will deliver all the performance benefits of FSR to "nearly every game you own".

Turn it on in the driver software, lower the resolution in-game, and AMD's smart upscaling will take care of the rest. Though we've no idea how it compares to FSR in terms of fidelity, surely lower, but unlike FSR it is only compatible with the last two RDNA generations of AMD graphics cards, so there might be some other magic going on in there.

However it shakes out you're looking at a free performance





upgrade for your RX 5000-series, or newer, GPU with just a driver update.

Nvidia already has its own Image Sharpening feature that works in a similar way, but is also this year introducing Deep Learning Dynamic Super Resolution (DLSS) for those happy with their performance, but want higher image quality. It's a downscaler which will take higher res inputs and drop them down to a lower resolution for a sharper, more detailed final result without a performance penalty. Think of it like getting your own remastered version of pretty much any game you apply it to.

CARDS ON THE TABLE

Intel's also getting in on the graphics card game this year, too, and is going to add its own upscaling tech to the party as well. Xe Super Sampling (XeSS) will come in two flavours; one will be hardware agnostic – but will still need dev implementation – while the other will use the AI smarts of its new Alchemist GPUs to deliver

DLSS-a-like speed and fidelity improvements.

However good, or not, Intel's first gaming graphics cards turn out to be, we're still going to end up in a position this year where whatever GPU is humming away inside your gaming rig, you'll have your pick of three different upscaling technologies all promising to deliver

better performance in the games you already own.

It's not just the hardware manufacturers looking to improve gaming performance on

existing hardware – or maybe looking for some sort of absolution for their combined GPU crisis responsibilities. With Epic's Unreal Engine 5 we're going to be treated with Temporal Super Resolution, an engine-based upscaler, and rumour has it that Microsoft is working on something similar for its consoles, which may end up hitting PC, too.

2022 may just be the year where you don't need to upgrade your graphics card. Luckily. ■

NVIDIA'S DEEP LEARNING SUPER SAMPLING KICKED IT ALL OFF

TOP: Nvidia and AMD both came out swinging at this year's CES event.

ABOVE: AMD's FSR doesn't require specific GPU tech to improve gaming performance.

SOFT TOUCH

The lowdown on Microsoft DirectStorage

What the hell is it?

A new DirectX API that takes its cues from Microsoft jamming SSDs into its latest console generation to unleash the latent power of solid state storage.

How's it promising to make playing games better?

For modern open world games, with huge vistas and vast maps, streaming all that game data from your SSD into system memory, in and out of the CPU, then into GPU memory takes a huge amount of time and that can hurt frame rates. With DirectStorage, the processor's cut out of the equation entirely, speeding everything up.

Just Windows 11 then, huh?

No, it's rolling out to Windows 10, too. And will be compatible with either PCIe 3.0 or PCIe 4.0 SSDs as well.

When?

There's no concrete timing yet, but we've heard stories of game devs working with the API already, so we're not expecting it to be far away at all.



SCREEN LIVING

Finally, we live in the age of great **GAMES ON TV**.

By Wes Fenlon

Castlevania, the game, started as a pastiche of Universal monster movies, sending an orange guy with a whip to fight a mummy, Frankenstein's monster, and big bad Dracula. Castlevania, the show, spent its fourth season exploring the relationships of a quartet of immortal vampire queens, reflecting on how we process grief, and looking absolutely incredible in motion. I don't think it's an outcome that anyone expected, but seven years after the last (maligned) *Castlevania* game, the Netflix series has become the new benchmark for videogame adaptations.

I can imagine an alternate universe where we never got Netflix's *Castlevania* because Konami was still scarred by a disastrous '90s Hollywood adaptation. Dolph Lundgren was a yolked Simon Belmont, John Travolta was the most overacted Dracula in screen history, and the film bombed so hard that its only enduring cultural legacy was a viral reaction gif of Dolph punching a laughably fake Medusa head until its eyes bugged out.

But in this reality, we got a cartoon that mixes philosophy and long, thoughtful dialogue with toilet

humour and extreme violence. After decades of Hollywood pumping out bland, cringy, or outright dogshit videogame movies, the last few years of videogame adaptations have been legitimately amazing, because TV finally gave them time to breathe. The curse has been broken, and we mostly have Netflix to thank for it.

VIDEO NASTIES

Hollywood movies were never the right fit for games. There are probably a hundred reasons why, but if you look back at most of the adaptations made in the '90s and 2000s, you can see the big problems screaming out in all caps. The writers rarely captured what truly made the games appealing; the big movie stars of the day took roles they were poor fits for; the stories either adhered too closely to the games or barely felt like adaptations. Add in what were usually low budgets and B-tier directors and it's no wonder they're almost all relegated to the Bad Movie Night pile.

The streak of bad game movies continued on well into the 2010s. I got drunk on giant Russian beers while watching *Warcraft* and was still shook by how terrible it was. Best case we got something like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, an uncomfortably whitewashed but somewhat competent adventure flick.

Most were far worse, or just boring retreads of games we'd already played, like *Assassin's Creed*.

If the thought ever occurred to movie producers that an adaptation could somehow enrich the source material by building out the backstories of familiar characters or embellishing the game worlds with more detail, it never showed on screen. That's finally changed in just the last couple years with *Castlevania*, *The Witcher*, and especially *Arcane*, the *League of Legends* spin-off that has been a true breakout hit.

Arcane is what a show looks like when it has all the time it needs to cook. I've never seen 3D animation like it: *Arcane* might not outdo Pixar on raw detail, but it's in a class of its own on style, blending in 2D animation for special effects and detouring into totally different animation for striking one-off scenes.

Just as important, *Arcane*'s characters get all the depth here that they never could in the MOBA, fleshing out alliances and rivalries with tragic backstories and political speeches and relationships that get enough screen time to feel real. The most common opinion I've seen about *Arcane* is that it's a great show regardless of whether or not you've played *League of Legends*, which is a rare honour for a game adaptation. And for fans, it's even better: they get to spend hours immersed in a world they've only ever seen in concept art and short cinematics.

GOOD TO BE BAD

Castlevania also uses the game heroes and timeline as a springboard for a richer, character-driven story. And it's



NEXT TIME ON...

Upcoming game-to-TV adaptations to look forward to



DEVIL MAY CRY

The creators of the *Castlevania* show are already working on giving *Devil May Cry* the same treatment, with an eight episode season to come and further seasons planned. Dante, Vergil and Lady are confirmed as the leads.



HALO

After a long wait, the *Halo* TV series should finally be debuting this year. Pablo Schreiber (*American Gods*) is playing the Master Chief himself, while Cortana will be played by Jen Taylor, who's portrayed her in the games.



ASSASSIN'S CREED

News has been quiet on this one since it was announced at the end of 2020, but in theory Ubisoft is still bringing a live-action series to Netflix – and presumably hoping to wipe away the stain of the film adaptation.



CUPHEAD

A full TV show based on the animation of *Cuphead* was announced in the summer of 2020. We were expecting to see this one release on Netflix in 2021, but the Covid-19 pandemic may have delayed things behind the scenes.



FALLOUT

The creators of *Westworld* are working on an apocalyptic adaptation for Amazon Prime, which was teased with a trailer that, while short and vague, at least seems to confirm it'll be committing to the retro-future style of the games.



Castlevania breathes new life into long-standing characters.

not afraid to fully reshape some characters so that it can do more with them. Isaac, the show's richest character, works through a knot of hatred and self-loathing season-by-season, making for some of its best conversations. In the PS2 game *Curse of Darkness*, meanwhile, he's your quintessential cackling villain dressed for a bondage party. I haven't seen every videogame movie Hollywood's shit out since the '90s, but I can't think of a single one that improves a character for the better.

Time is really key here: instead of trying to cram a full game world into a two-hour movie, *Arcane* and *Castlevania* both use their stretch of episodes to dig deeper. *The Witcher* has a bit more in common with Hollywood adaptations – a big part of the appeal is 'famous movie star appears in live action, and it's expensive' – but it also benefits from time and a star who's dedicated to the source material.

The flexibility of streaming means a game adaptation can take the form it needs to, rather than being mashed into the same generic mould. In this new era, it's OK for *The Witcher* series to be the big expensive fantasy show, Netflix's stab at *Game of Thrones*, while animated spinoff *Nightmare of the Wolf* can fully own

its role as a slaughterfest starring Sexy Vesemir. There's no pressure for it to explain the whole *Witcher* universe to a mainstream audience.

Castlevania was the trailblazer of this new generation of game adaptations, but *The Witcher* and *Arcane* are the shows that will inform the next decade of game adaptations because they have that air of prestige. It won't be long before Amazon, Apple, Disney+, and all the other streamers start looking at games for their next billion-dollar epic. Mass

Effect looks like it's on the verge of happening already, so it's probably only a matter of time until more series get the *Uncle Pennybags* treatment.

Hollywood's going to keep trying, but the latest evidence shows little sign of them evolving beyond the same kinds of movies they've always done. *Uncharted* will look like *Uncharted*, but it won't be any better than playing *Uncharted*, and it won't make playing *Uncharted* better, either. *Borderlands*, with Kevin Hart, is a wildcard, but this seems like another movie that would work far better as an animated series that had time to explore Pandora. Game adaptations belong to the streamers now, and we've just seen the first few examples of how much better they can be. ■

ARCANE AND CASTLEVANIA BOTH USE THEIR EPISODES TO DIG DEEPER



LEFT: *The Witcher*'s technically not based on the games, but... come on, we all know.

BELOW: *Arcane* was one of the biggest surprises of last year – an unexpected triumph of game TV.



THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Our **PREDICTIONS** for the year ahead – and beyond

Over the past few pages, we've laid out all sorts of exciting things in PC gaming's future – but we reckon there's even more to look forward to. Indulge us as we make our boldest predictions for the events of 2022, combining expert speculation, wishful thinking, and a glimpse into our crystal balls.

Of course, this hobby is one of unbridled chaos – games rise and fall, technology constantly surprises us, and a global pandemic throws everything off its axis whenever it can. Nothing is set in stone. But we still feel pretty good about these predictions. If they come true, we'll be vindicated, and lauded as the prophetic geniuses we surely are. If they don't... well, you can enjoy making fun of us on January 2023.



Bloodborne will come to PC

By Tyler Colp

▶ If I keep saying it, it will happen. This is the year we're going to get *Bloodborne*, FromSoftware's bloodiest action game, on PC. Or at least an announcement. The year is already starting with the PC port of the 2018 *God of War*. That's clearly a step towards releasing a much better game where you get to beat up a (werewolf) dad instead of playing one.

With *Elden Ring* releasing this year, it's time to let a lot more people play *Bloodborne*, even if it's not fully remade like the PlayStation 5 *Demon's Souls*. All the game needs is 60fps and support for some high resolutions. It's a vital release that helped shape modern action games and it would be a crime not to have a semi-updated version of it. It's not even my favourite in the series, but it's a game I'm dying to play again.



GTA VI will be announced for 2023

By Chris Livingston

▶ 2023 will be ten years since *GTA V*, and that seems like the right amount of time to bash out another *GTA* game, or at least get close enough to announce it officially. There have certainly been enough rumours flying around, so maybe this prediction isn't all that wild, but I think we'll get our first trailer in time for E3.

I predict a return to the southern US. The map will cover all of Florida this time, which is ripe for Rockstar's satirical takes on American culture.

GTA VI will be full of sun, sand and southerners. Maybe. And if you insist I get bold with this prediction: it'll actually launch on PC at the same time as consoles this time. For real.



The pandemic has already changed development forever

By Robin Valentine

▶ The effect of the novel coronavirus on the games industry has been disastrous. I'm not sure we've ever seen so many delays in such a short span of time, and it's clear that many studios and publishers have found it incredibly difficult to adapt to changing conditions.

But they are adapting. The Covid-19 pandemic has proved the ultimate testing ground for remote working, and many major studios must now be discovering what a few groundbreaking indies have known for years – that removing the need for workers to physical inhabit offices opens up your recruitment pool to talent from all over the world.

I think we'll get a healthier games industry as a result. Not needing to live in one of a few expensive cities in order to be a developer will make the industry accessible to a far greater spectrum of people, including those with disabilities, from less well-off backgrounds, or hailing from underrepresented cultures and nations. I think that'll make for a more exciting and diverse slate of games to come.



The NFT craze will be short-lived

By Tyler Wilde

▶ There's maybe something to NFTs – in the age of online storefronts, it might be nice to feel a little more ownership over some of our digital stuff. But, despite the speed at which the concept is already being adopted, it's currently incoherent at best and a goldmine for scam artists at worst.

Industry execs have just been saying what they always say about new tech – stuff like “this is a

technology that's coming” and “we can't ignore it” – and none of the wishful speculation from blockchain evangelists has convinced me that NFTs are really going to transform gaming in the near future. There are a ton of barriers to widespread adoption – including the likes of Valve, which doesn't allow NFTs on Steam. It all points to one outcome – that the value of ape drawings will have corrected itself by Dec 2022.



Another Nintendo genre will bloom on PC

By Lauren Morton

▶ Ever since *Stardew Valley* kicked off a slew of other *Harvest Moon*-inspired farming simulations on PC, I've been waiting for the next surprise hit. In the last five years, there have been a couple other genres usually relegated to Nintendo systems that seemed like they might make waves on PC. *Pokémon*-like creature collectors *Ooblets* and

Temtem didn't quite catch fire. *Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl* wasn't a worthy *Smash Bros* contender, and the Warner Bros *Smash*-like *MultiVersus* is still upcoming.

I think 2022 is the year we see another traditional Nintendo genre leap to PC with a surprise hit. But which one? Maybe we'll finally get a breakout *Smash*-like, creature catcher, or social sim?

PC GAMER

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REABT HOLE

DOWN

The last remaining **MATRIX ONLINE** fans can't wait for the renaissance

By Luke Winkie

The faint remnants of *The Matrix Online* still radiate somewhere in the ether. I'm not saying it's possible to jack in, but... well, do some Googling and you may or may not find a website dedicated to emulating this beloved, doomed MMO long after its funeral. You may or may not uncover a hyperlink that downloads a preserved version of the game client and a crack designed to jailbreak it from Sony's rigor mortis grasp. You may or may not be asked to fabricate login credentials, and you may or may not watch your computer seize up as it attempts to render assets that have been left to atrophy since 2009. But if you follow the white rabbit far enough – if you take the red pill and slink past the mouldering firewalls like the brave pirates of the Nebuchadnezzar once did – you will eventually find those abandoned greyscale buildings, that queasy smog-stained sky, and a deep, permeating sense of loss. *The Matrix Online* shambles on, creaky but undeterred.

It will not take long for you to understand that *The Matrix Online* has grown shrivelled and desiccated in its afterlife. The game was released in 2005, and Sega pulled the plug just four years later. *The Matrix Online*'s emulation project – the only way to play the game in 2022 – was pieced together by a hacker named Rajko through reams of server code he scraped together as the game entered its hospice period. Rajko has toiled for 12 years as the MMO's personal curator, and as I write the emulation resembles more of a zombie than a messiah. A huge swathe of content is missing, and will likely never be recovered. The project is not capable of providing combat, quests, character progression, or many of the gameplay elements that a nation of redpills once enjoyed.

And yet, against all odds, *The Matrix Online* keeps on finding new ways to stubbornly survive. For those who grew up adoring this game and the greater Matrix mythos, that's more than enough.

A CLASSIC IN STASIS

"You [use the emulation] to chat, explore, equip clothing and weapons, and emote," says Bitbomb, one of the many denizens of a Discord server »

The Matrix Online

» dedicated to the ongoing resuscitation of the Matrix MMO. “Most recently, your character can finally sit on things. That didn’t work for the longest time.”

The Matrix Online deserved better. Hell, *The Matrix* itself deserved better. All the pieces were in place. The Wachowski sisters pioneered a dense fiction perfectly tuned for an ascendent generation of technophiles: a filthy dystopia embellished with snakeskin trench coats and mirrored sunglasses. They used Hollywood to realise a generation’s worth of latent cyberpunk wish-fulfilment. The franchise was downright monolithic for a few years, the first film scooping up nearly \$500 million at the box office and earning a quartet of Oscars at the Academy Awards. Neo, Trinity and Morpheus were consecrated into a new pantheon of superheroes long before the Marvel revolution.

If you asked me what I thought the future held in 1999, I’d tell you

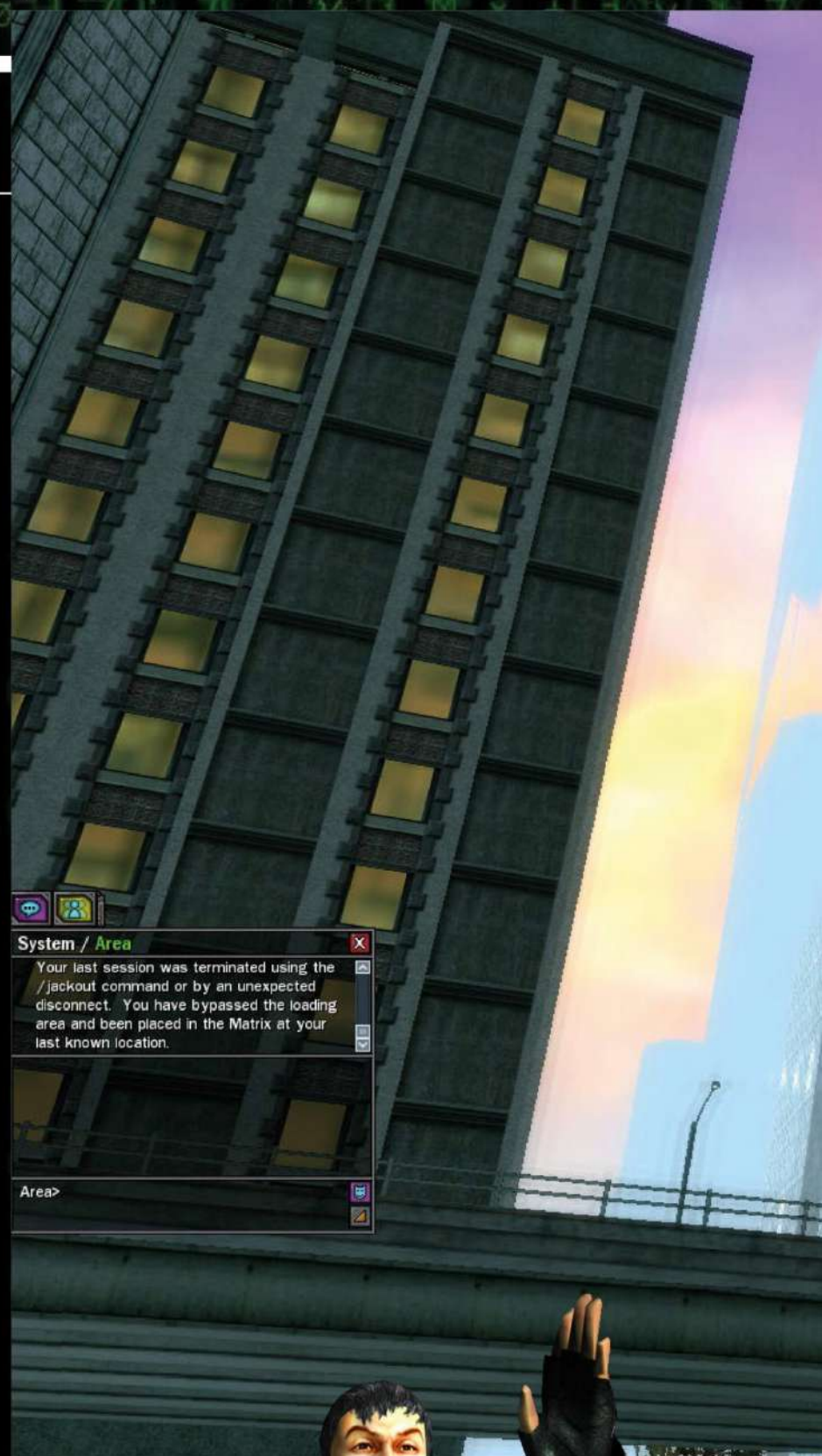
that it seemed inevitable that *The Matrix* would continue to cultivate its multiversal empire with a litany of sequels, TV shows, comic books and videogames, securing its place as an omnivorous media juggernaut. *The Matrix Online* was supposed to be the capstone of that promise; a persistent metaverse in which the saga could grow, twist and iterate forever. The Wachowskis named the MMO as the

canonical successor to the trilogy, so for a crop of newly-minted fans captivated by transhuman potential, a subscription was a no brainer.

A PERSISTENT METaverse IN WHICH THE SAGA COULD GROW

AFTERLIFE

But you probably know the story from here. *The Matrix*’s two muddled sequels lacked the watershed, mind-bending clarity that elevated the original, and by 2005, the franchise’s zeitgeist had thoroughly passed through the nervous system of American society, leaving only a chattering niche of diehards behind.



ABOVE: Some of the game's skylines are still evocative all these years later.

FAR LEFT: Getting redpilled.





The Matrix Online earned middling reviews and a small, negligible playerbase upon release, and when it was mercifully snuffed out of existence, nobody really seemed to notice. But the passage of time has been kind to the pop relics of the early 2000s and, right now, we are once again living through a hot flash of Matrix mania. The fourth film in the series – *The Matrix Resurrections* – is hgoing down a storm thanks to its Covid-mandated home streaming release, and rumours of a fifth entry are already being strenuously denied.

Those who adored this misadventurous MMO did not need a renaissance to reignite their love, but when I hit the dirty avenues of the emulation myself, I caught a few other newbies hiding out in the chat box, probing the ancient DNA of our once-and-future blockbuster. They, like me, caught the fever again. The Matrix has us, same as it ever was.

Nobody, not even the most ardent *Matrix Online* defenders, wants to argue that the game was unfairly treated by critics. “The flaws were

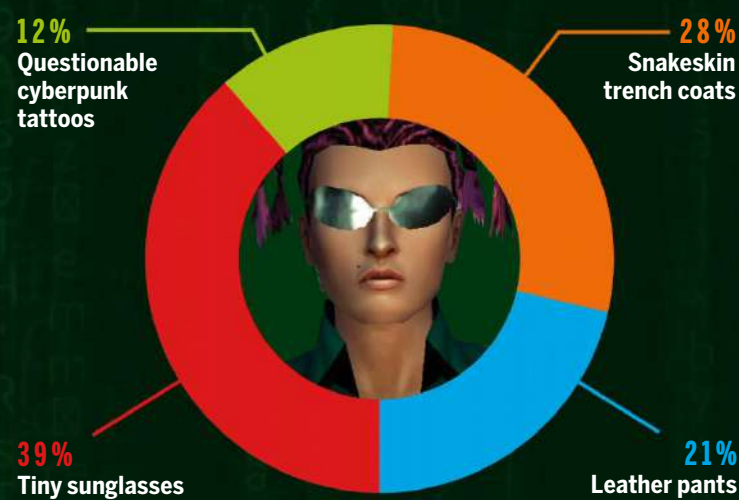
numerous,” says Vesuvius, another Discord member who was perhaps the most effusive about the MMO’s legacy during my interviews. “The combat [was unbalanced,] there were bugs, exploits, and a PvP system with no reward other than bragging rights.” All of those problems

eventually proved untenable. The MMO held under 500 active players by the time it was shuttered, which is about as grim as a server population can get.

But Vesuvius believes that there are certain elements of *The Matrix Online* experience that haven’t been replicated before or since by any of the major players in the game industry. In particular, he points to the game’s Live Events Team, which was composed of genuine Sony developers who would take control of important lore characters – think Morpheus or Seraph – and act out a crucial junction of the narrative in real time. The idea of a studio reaching through the looking glass and manipulating the contours of the Matrix without any scripting or artifice is so perfect I can’t believe it didn’t make a bigger splash. When I was hearing the same canned dialogue in *WoW*’s *Stormwind* over and over again, *The Matrix Online* was experimenting with spontaneous public theatre – a cavalcade of players chasing Niobe

CYBER DNA

Feeling lucky, punk?





» through the corridors, desperate to eavesdrop on any juicy intel. That is a bold bit of game design; maybe we really were missing out. “The [live events] were unannounced, spontaneous, secretive,” says Vesuvius. “Even if an event took place on your server for your organisation, there was no guarantee you could participate. Screenshots of events were posted to forums the following day. They were often the best way to stay up to date.”

THE RED PILL

Other players I spoke to extolled the flexibility of *The Matrix Online*’s talent tree – another element of the game that is sadly impossible to resuscitate in the emulation. “We could swap out our abilities whenever we wanted. In other MMOs when you chose your role you had to stick to it, but I loved the freedom to change my loadout when it suited me,” says Dan, who tells me he started playing the game when he was 14 years old. Given how the rest of the RPG landscape has slowly

sanded down the hegemony of the Almighty Spec, perhaps Dan is right when he says that *The Matrix Online* was ahead of its time.

By and large though, these wayward fans are most fond of the way this MMO told its story. *The Matrix Online* was religious about its plot; dispensing frequent cinematics and universe-altering ‘critical missions’ that slowly unfurled what life was like after Neo. In 2005, as it became clear that there

was no more Matrix fiction on the horizon, this videogame was the only way to get a taste of that endlessly cascading code.

The Matrix Extended Universe goes places, and these players savoured it to the last drop. “Niobe revealed her true feelings for Neo. Ghost resisted temptation and corruption at the hands of a sexy machine liaison designed to appeal to humans. As the Oracle hinted, he went on to lead the charge

CLASS ACTS

Our favourite character archetypes offered in the game

Devoted Ascetic

– Aren’t we all?

Fanatic Self Improver

– Hustle culture, baby.

Suspicious Cynic

– Also known as, ‘games journalist’.

Detached Spectator

– The Keanu Reeves of character tropes.

Troubled Intellectual

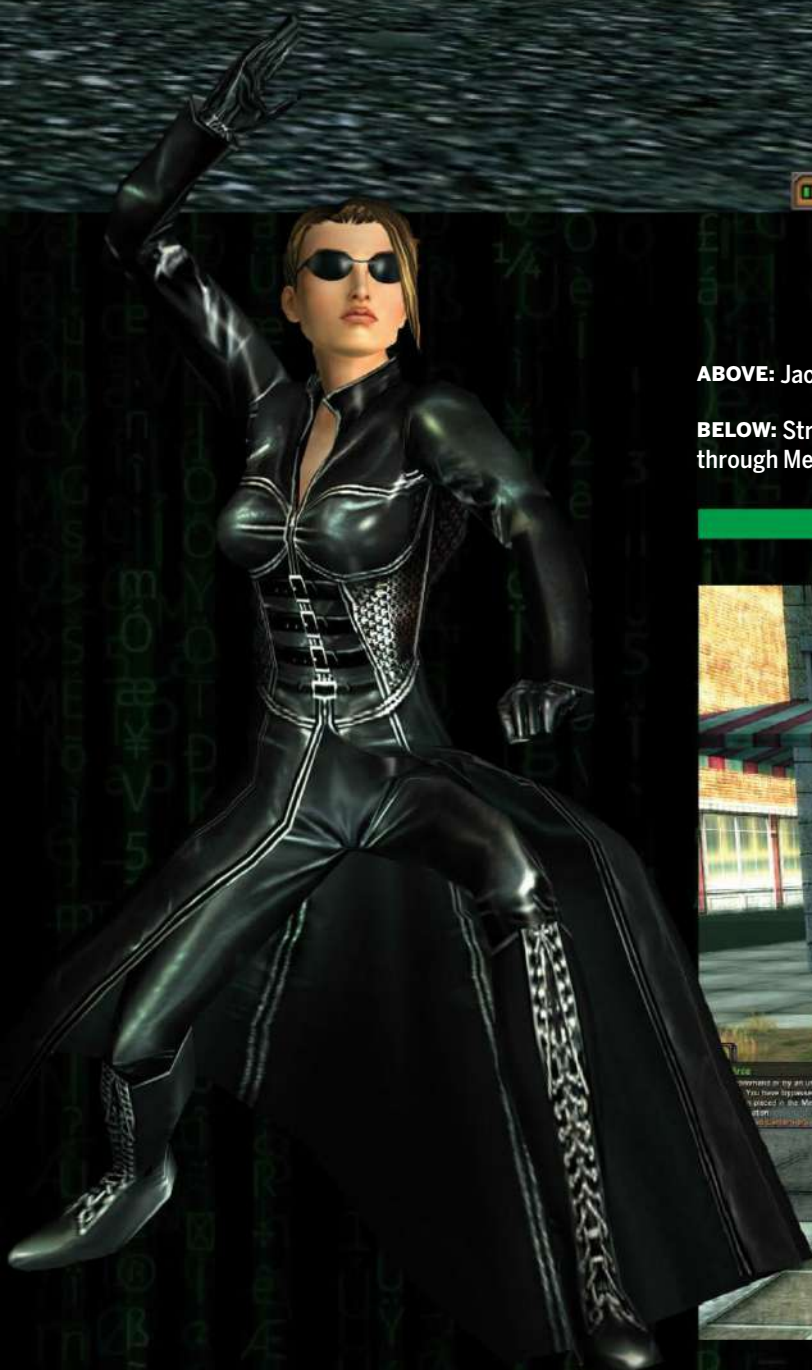
– Sure, let’s call it that.

The Matrix Online



ABOVE: Jacking out.

BELOW: Strolling through Mega City.



absent of Neo and Morpheus,” says Vesuvius. “The lore was always the heart of the game.”

RESURRECTION

Neo is a myth in *The Matrix Resurrections*, reinserted into the overly complex power-generating apparatus as a game developer making something not a million miles away from *The Matrix Online*. And while I love the idea of the band getting back together – Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, Jada Pinkett Smith – for an Endgame-style supergroup bonanza that still honours the scaffolding laid out by an old, dead MMO, it’s the original 1999 movie that is most referenced. After the franchise’s long, circuitous trip back to the pinnacle of pop culture, it would be almost fitting to have seen cutscene compilations from the game instead.

Vesuvius says that he desperately hoped the MMO would remain

canonically enshrined in the new movie, but others have made peace with the Wachowskis pressing the reset button. “A reboot could be supremely inventive. I feel like I would be experiencing it with the same folks I did way back when,” says a *Matrix Online* lifer who goes by Sugaree. “The deepest feeling of satisfaction I got came from socialising. I’m not afraid of a reboot.”

Regardless of what comes next, *The Matrix Online* will never flicker out for good. The game is enfeebled – a shell of itself – but it persists because the memories have

never grown stale. Take a walk in the uncanny metropolis of Mega City, close your eyes, and be whisked away to an era where these streets were packed with kung-fu fights, leather dusters, and smoked ammunition. A crack of light is pouring into this tomb as *The Matrix* stirs once more. At last, after more than a decade of undeath, there is finally hope on the horizon. ■

“THE LORE WAS ALWAYS THE HEART OF THE GAME”





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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Wait training

If there's one virtue worth honing as a PC gamer, it's patience. Sure, you could've jumped ship to PlayStation back in 2018 and played Sony's excellent grumpy dad simulator *God of War* back then. You'd have had a great time! But it wouldn't have been a 90fps great time, now would it? As ever, the very best version of the game comes to those who wait. It's that same patience that got us to this place at all – we endured and outlasted the petty

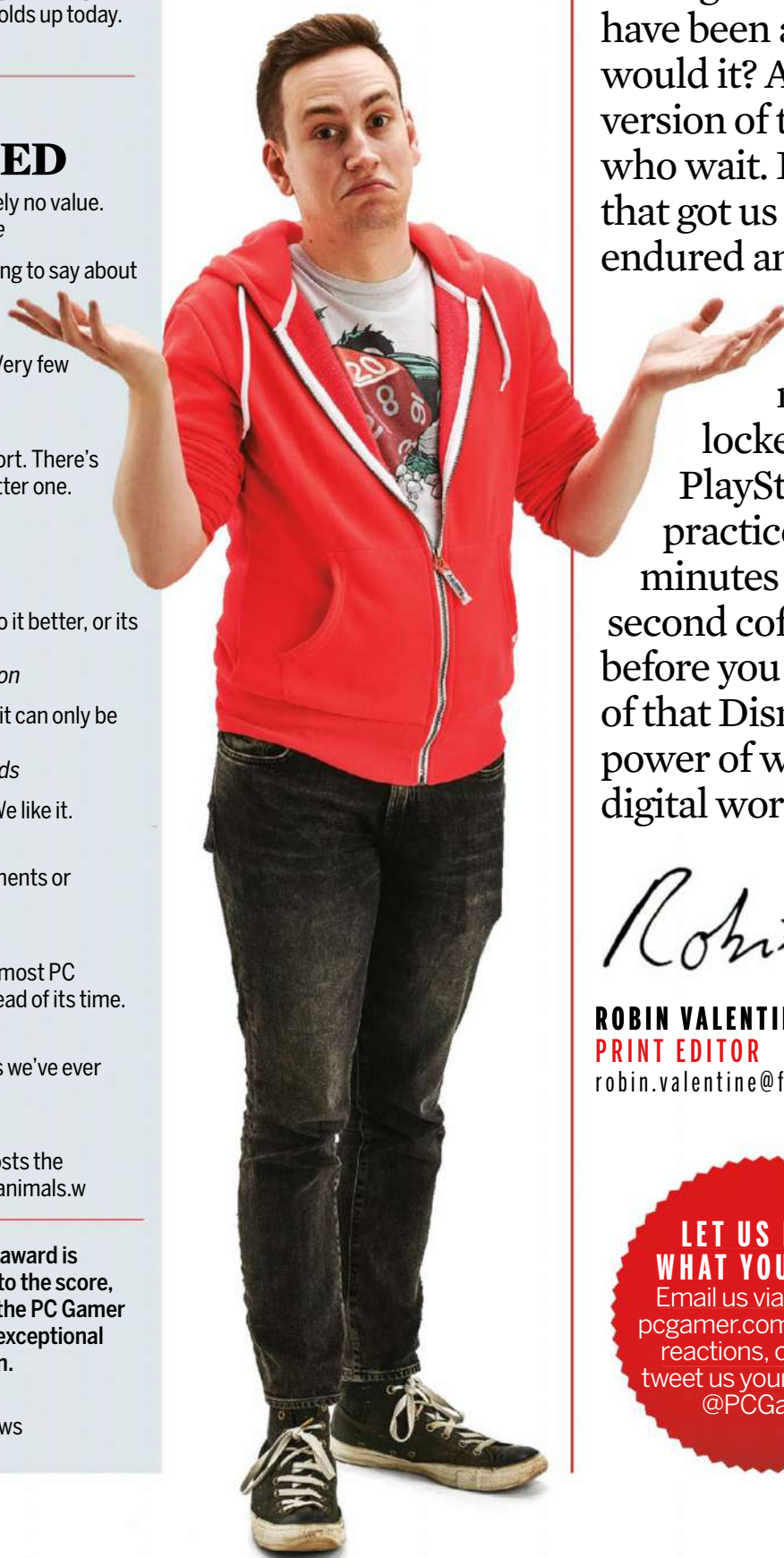
console wars, and now I'm running four page reviews of games once locked up exclusively on PlayStation and Switch. So practice it. Wait an extra ten minutes before having your second coffee. Give it an extra day before you watch the new episode of that Disney+ show. Learn the power of waiting, and this whole digital world will be yours.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer





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This month's ever-enduring reviews



RICH STANTON
Specialist in
Gunlance diplomacy
Currently playing
Monster Hunter: Rise
This month
Got to return to his favourite hobby: hunting dinosaurs to extinction.



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Boomeraxes
Currently playing
God of War
This month
Threw an axe, then called it back. Then he threw an axe, and called it back. Then...



ROBERT ZAK
Specialist in
Roamin' around
Currently playing
Expeditions: Rome
This month
Got started on his quota of historical strategy game reviews for the year.



SAMANTHA GREER
Specialist in
Disc jokes
Currently playing
Windjammers 2
This month
Learned slightly more than she needed to know about Frisbee.



OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
Specialist in
Spiky haired lads
Currently playing
Final Fantasy VII
This month
Returned as our *FF* expert and suspicious console lover.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Clubbing
Currently playing
VGA Golf
This month
Maintained his reputation by not making a single joke about balls or holes.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Mob justice
Currently playing
Yakuza Kiwami
This month
Gaming's most mild-mannered reviewer got lost in a world of digital crime.

APEX PREDATOR

MONSTER HUNTER: RISE is as good as Capcom's flagship series has ever been

By Rich Stanton

It's been a genuine pleasure over the years watching *Monster Hunter* go from a niche favourite to wild success in Japan, making inroads in the West, before smashing through and becoming a global hit. That's perhaps over-simplifying the arc for Capcom's beast-basher par excellence, but the series now has a huge fanbase and the kind of resource behind it that has resulted in years of better and better games, as well as a distinct split.

There's the *Monster Hunter: World* take on the series, which has the fundamentals but is a seriously big-budget endeavour – a visual and aural spectacle with gorgeous, flowing animations and jaw-dropping monsters. *Monster Hunter: Rise* is the other branch, following in the footsteps of games like *Generations* and hewing closer to the series' portable heritage: smaller, more contained maps rather than larger more open-world style exploration. *Rise* was, of course, originally designed as a Nintendo Switch exclusive and, though this PC release is a good port with everything you'd expect, it has nowhere near that immediate visual 'wow' factor that *World* did. Nor can it compete on things like textures or the stunning bespoke animations for monsters

fighting each other. Thing is, though, *Rise* is the better game.

Monster Hunter's problem for new players is also the game's main strength: this is a combat system of almost unparalleled depth and precision, with dozens of different playstyles. It's overwhelming at first. *Rise* has easily the best onboarding experience in the series, and in the process introduces several new mechanics

that enhance the hunting experience even beyond *Generations*.

Several new mechanics that enhance the hunting experience

GOOD BOY

One of the most fun additions is your Palamute, a rideable dog. You've still got your Palico, of course, but the dog transforms the game's traversal which, arguably, was always a weak – or at least not standout – element. Series veterans will recall many a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Murder monsters then make cute hats out of their faces

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, i7-7700HQ

MULTIPLAYER
Four-player co-op

LINK
monsterhunter.com

long slog across maps you know like the back of your hand, simply because that's the way things were, but in *Rise* your options with and without the dog now include wall running and a Spider-Man-style grapple that doubles up as an essential battle tool. You can not only get around faster than ever, but it feels amazing to do so.

This in turn changes up the rhythm of fights in an awesome way. In older *Monster Hunter* games, there always comes the point in a fight where your quarry realises they're in a spot of bother and takes off. You could very rarely stop them escaping or interrupt these movement sequences, but now, you just instantly hop on the dog and give chase. This may make me sound slightly psychopathic but it is enormously satisfying to chase down a wounded creature trying to escape, and set about it with your mates.

There's a quality to *Rise* that maybe isn't obvious, which is that it has stripped away a huge amount of the busywork the games used to come with. You used to have to look up what the 'key quests' for each hunter rank were online, for example, whereas now the game just tells you. The upgrade trees for weapons have been made clearer. There's a mini tutorial or guidance mission for every important element. It punts all the stuff that was a bit annoying.

In turn this means you spend most of your time playing *Monster Hunter: Rise* hunting monsters rather than fiddling around in menus or trying to work out what to do next, and hunting is why I play these games. You can zoom through hunts with almost zero downtime, and combined with the faster pace of the game it makes *Rise* feel so much more vibrant than the older titles. The sense of verticality it has in the locations and the way you zip around them soon becomes second nature, and it really feels like from the opening seconds the chase is on.

RISE AND SHINE

How you'll spend your time in *Monster Hunter: Rise*

20% RIDING YOUR DOG
Dashing, drifting and wall-running on your Palamute never stops being the coolest way to get around.

10% TWEAKING YOUR GUILD CARD
Got to make sure your profile looks as ridiculous as possible.



5% GETTING CARTED
Rise starts out gentle, but things ramp up, and if you're not paying attention you'll be wheeled off before you know it.

15% SHOPPING
You'll come to love the blacksmiths who make new weapons and armour for you out of monster parts.

50% HUNTING MONSTERS
Capcom's trimmed away the fat to ensure that you can spend as much time as possible just doing what you're here to do.

A quick shout-out for the *Rise* soundtrack, which is simply gorgeous and invigorating in equal measure.

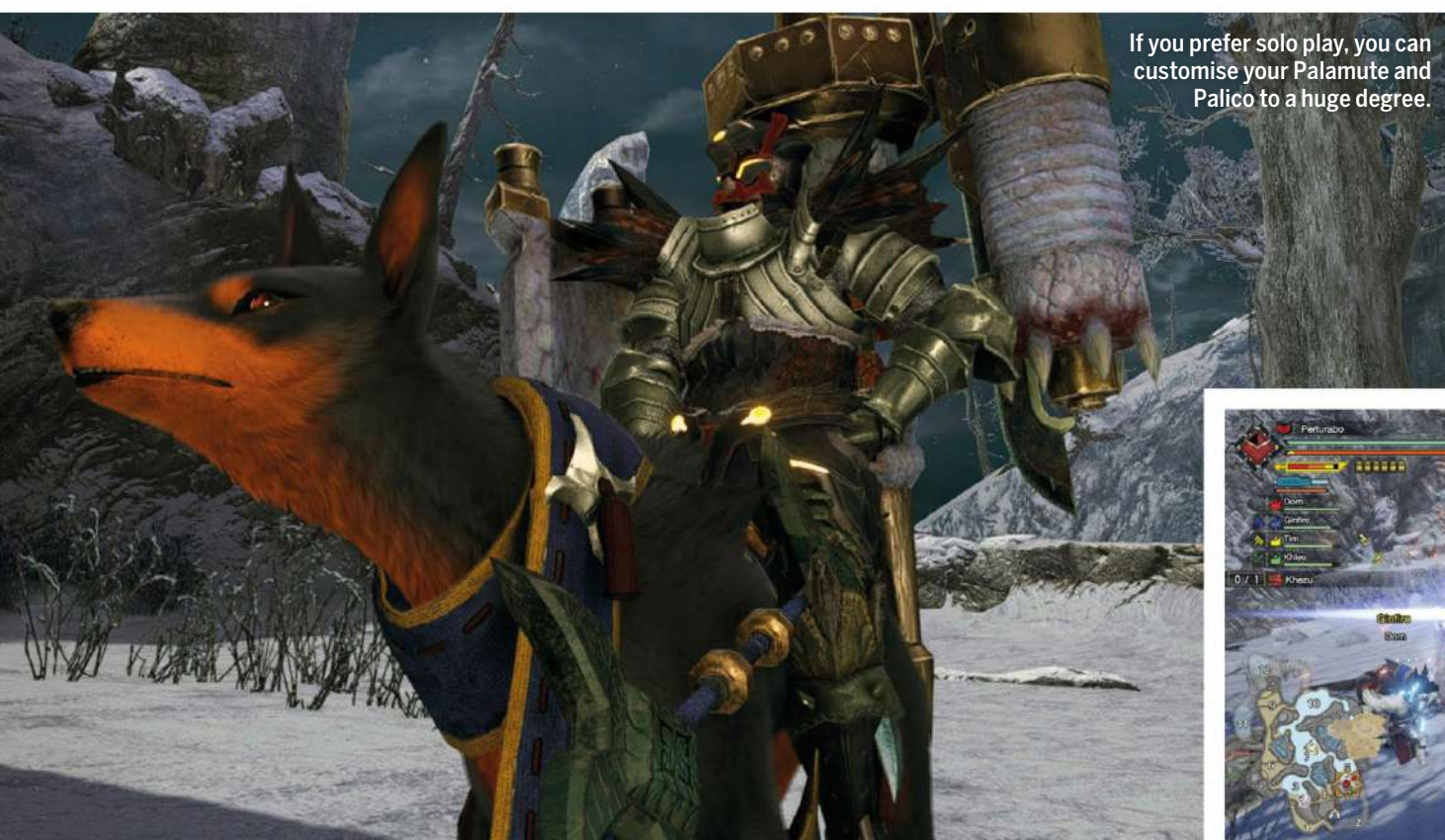


FAR LEFT: As ever the experience is split into a singleplayer 'Village' campaign and the MP-focused hunter quests (which can also be tackled solo).



BELOW: The online experience is further enhanced by a bunch of quick chat commands.





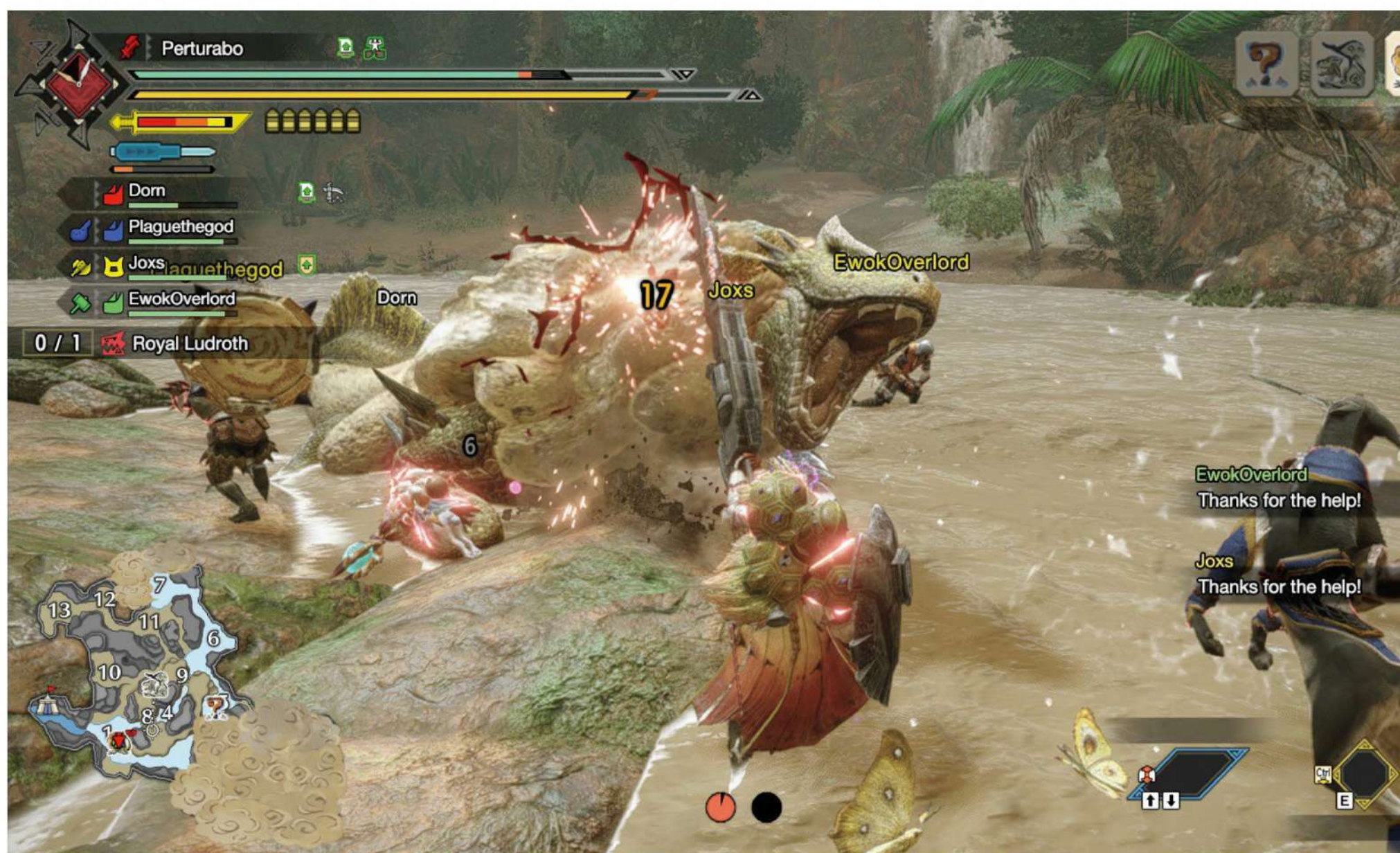
If you prefer solo play, you can customise your Palamute and Palico to a huge degree.



RIGHT: If you're not keen on Rampages, they come with sub-objectives that allow early completion.

FAR RIGHT: *MH: Rise* includes an Arena mode, as ever, which lets you fight monsters for different and snazzy rewards.

BELOW: After a few hunts you'll unlock skills: basically, Capcom special moves for hunters.



Performance was smooth on a GTX 1070 – not that you'd expect any different. *Rise* occasionally suffered from screen tearing in the review build, though I didn't notice any frame drops or other performance issues, and the release version of the game seems to have fixed what issues there were. There are some basic presets before the graphics settings allow you to turn a wide range of options on or off, as well as support for ultrawide monitors and an uncapped framerate.

The obvious caveat here is that, if you're playing this in 4K on max settings with a mega rig... it's never going to compete at that level. If you can stomach a few jagged edges and fuzzy textures, however, the art style more than makes up for the lack of grunt.

BEAUTY AND THE BEASTS

To return to the game itself, *Monster Hunter* has always been unforgiving: if you take its monsters lightly, even the weediest will quickly dispatch you. *Rise* follows the usual pattern of setting you off against small dinosaur-like creatures like the Great Baggi or Great Wroggi before introducing the wilder, weirder stuff like Tigrex, the stone-cold classics like Rathalos, and the (mostly) awe-inspiring fights against the Elder Dragons.

It's actually difficult to describe a 'typical' hunt in *Monster Hunter: Rise* because part of the game's inexhaustible quality is that there are so many dozens of large monsters by now it can mix and match them in endless new combinations. It's also less shy than ever before about having monsters fight one another, which used to happen rarely in the older games but is now very frequent (you can also temporarily 'ride' the monsters during these and enjoy a Godzilla moment).

The game's only odd element is the infrequent Rampage encounters, an awkward mix of tower defence, card game, and hunting. A horde of monsters come to attack the village gates, before which you can run around setting up automated and manual defences in designated zones via cards. These defences range from the basic ballista to special cards that bring powerful NPCs into the fray, and some are unlimited while others are one-use only.

The Rampages can be great but are also something of a confusing mix. As with everything in *Monster Hunter*, the experience is amplified immensely when you're playing in co-op, and indeed this particular mode feels like it doesn't quite land in singleplayer. But when you have a bunch of buddies and can take different lanes and gang up on the gate-breaking monsters to eliminate them quickly, Rampage can become both enormous fun and total carnage. My only sadness is that, for understandable reasons, the monsters don't leave corpses in this mode (but do drop

lots of lovely loot.)

On that note *Monster Hunter: Rise* streamlines and simplifies the enormous armour and weapon crafting systems. It's now clear what paths you can choose to pursue, the ingredients you'll need, and where you can hope for that equipment to eventually end up. The various systems are so deep and intertwined that things like set bonuses could feel a little obscured in the older titles, but, thankfully, are much more clearly presented here.

This speaks to a hundred other small quality of life touches in *Rise*. It tells you where the monsters are at the start of hunts, it's added a huge number of audio cues and shout-outs



between characters that help you understand the combat system's rhythm more clearly, the food menus are so much more simple, and endless other tiny touches add up to make the overall experience as frictionless as it can be.

NICE FACE

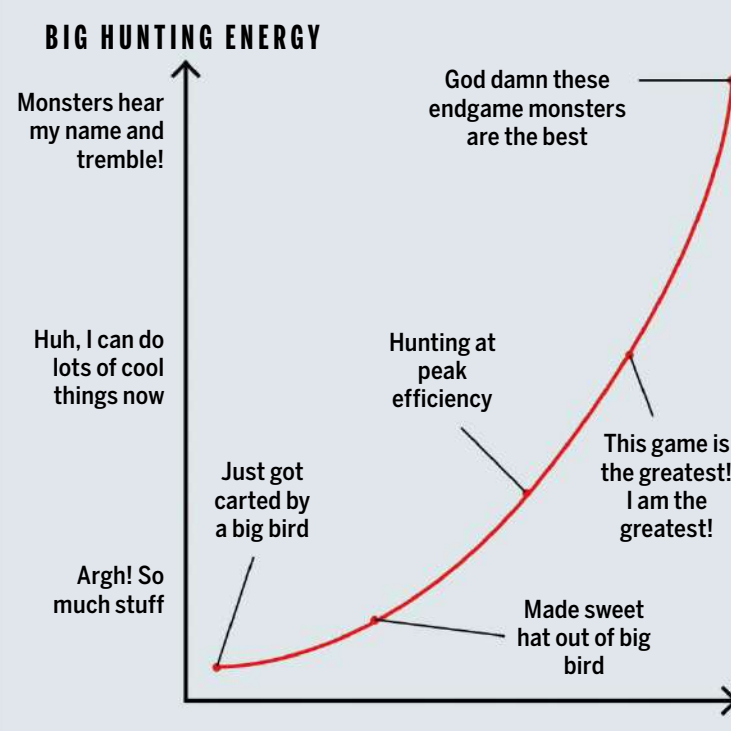
It all still comes down to the hunts though, and I just can't stop signing up for one more: the online experience here is a joy, finding matches instantly and loading you into hunts within seconds. If you ever need help, send out the call and within a minute of the hunt starting there are three random player coming along for the ride.

When in action, the monsters look absolutely amazing, and the older ones have more aggressive and surprising behaviours than ever. This game is a riot and in multiplayer it's stratospherically good: I went with gunlance (again) because I love it, and the weapon has certain familiar moves but also a whole bevy of new ones that make it feel completely fresh. The more *Rise* you play, the more it has to give. You begin unlocking special moves that give each weapon's moveset a new angle of approach, or a ten-ton slam for when it's needed (gunlance's big downside was always low mobility, but in *Rise* this feels irrelevant when you're doggo-sprinting, grappling, and force-blasting across the landscape). Sometimes you try out a new ability, process what has just happened, then mime a chef kiss and give silent thanks to the genius Capcom brain that thought it up.

The sheer variety of *Rise's* bestiary and weapons means that, even as the game cracks on at enormous pace, it doesn't stop serving up new stuff for a very long time. There's so much to do here, and it's all laid out and explained better than ever, with all of the little fiddly bits that used to annoy players just gone. Sure, this might be a Nintendo Switch game in origin, and visually it shows, but who cares, because it's hard to shake the feeling that *Monster Hunter: Rise* is as good as this series has ever been. Which is to say: as good as it gets. ■

CHART OF THE WILD

Falling in love with the hunt



PC GAMER VERDICT

Monster Hunter: Rise is the greatest entry in Capcom's flagship series, and a game that never stops giving.

90

SERIOUS SLIME

THE GUNK is an enjoyable adventure stuck short of greatness

By Dashiell Wood

As *SteamWorld* developer Image & Form's first attempt at a 3D world, *The Gunk*'s six hours of platforming and puzzling are a promising showcase of the studio's versatility. Unfortunately, while there's a degree of visual polish on show as you wind your way through an alien world, which may make for a pleasant afternoon of adventure, the brief runtime and unambitious plot mean it's unlikely to leave a lasting impression.

You play as Rani, one half of an interplanetary scrapper duo who are forced to make an emergency fuel stop on a mysterious alien planet. It soon becomes clear that this once thriving natural environment has been overrun by the titular malevolent black gunk, and with wildlife nowhere to be seen it's been left entirely up to you to clean things up. Luckily, Rani comes armed with a vacuuming prosthetic – which just so happens to be a perfect tool for sucking up any instances of the rogue sticky substance you might find.

Having landed, the first few hours are spent wandering the surrounding land sucking up all the goop in sight. It's a simple but surprisingly satisfying start and an opportunity to soak in much of the superb orchestral soundtrack. When you've cleared all the gunk in an area, it gets restored to its original form with a glorious green burst of energy that sees the shrivelled plants begin to bloom. The dreary grey-brown colour palette is transformed into a glorious kaleidoscope of bright pastel shades in a flash, and the result is a stunning effect that feels reminiscent of the excellent corrupted rooms in Remedy's *Control*. It's used a lot, particularly in the opening act, but the novelty of seeing my handiwork play out in such a dramatic fashion never quite seemed to wear off.

These transformations are also a vital part of your progression, as uncleared gunk can block entire paths and revived plants become makeshift bridges to inaccessible

Plants become makeshift bridges to inaccessible areas

areas. Your glove can also scan the various types of flora that you encounter throughout your journey and successful scans contribute towards the unlocking of upgrades that can be purchased with resources sucked up from the environment. Sadly, setting aside the ones that serve narrative purposes, these upgrades consist of little more than small stat bonuses.

Thankfully, platforming sections are far more developed and serve as a welcome break when these periods of prolonged exploration begin to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D platformer about cleaning up an alien planet from the creators of *SteamWorld Dig*

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Image & Form Games

PUBLISHER
Thunderful

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GTX 970, Intel i5-4460, 32GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3FCd0Ut

drag. Weaving your way through the slew of moving platforms and falling projectiles certainly doesn't reinvent the wheel, but the smooth animations and snappy controls make for an immensely enjoyable diversion nonetheless. Occasionally, enemies are thrown into the mix, but their basic attack patterns and predictable behaviours never pose much of a challenge. The puzzles are a simple fare and their short length means that many of the more interesting mechanics feel robbed of the time they need to develop before the end.

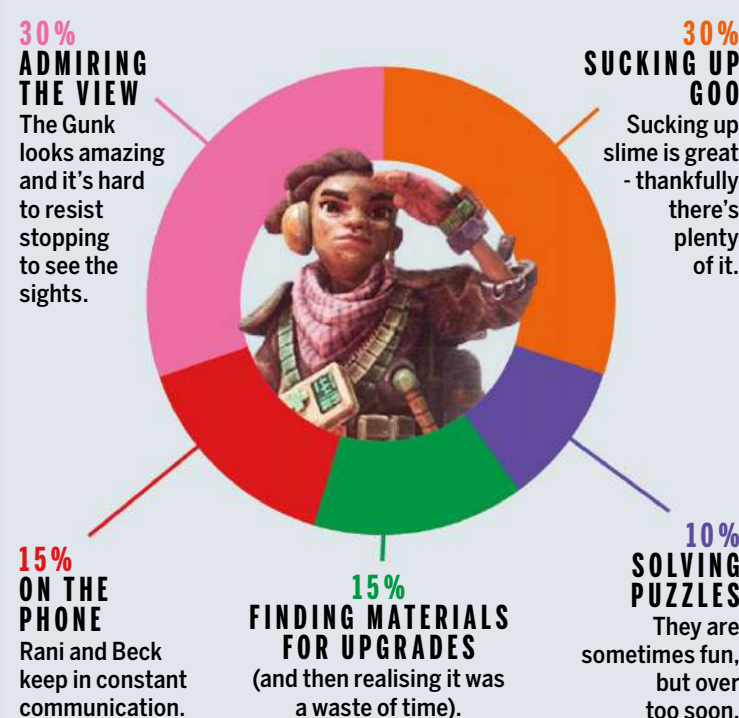
OOEY GOOEY

As for the story, the vast majority of dialogue occurs through radio conversations between Rani and her companion Beck that play out as you progress. The unremarkable plot revolving around Rani's attempt to uncover the planet's clichéd history is consistently elevated by the main cast's voice performances. The pair has chemistry, and there's something of a charming old married couple in their frequent back and forths. Aside from the radio conversations, there are also a few animated cutscenes at key intervals, but the awkward flapping mouths and perpetual wide-eyed stare of the character models can't help but spoil many of the more emotional moments.

Together, all these elements create a game that is fully functional, fairly entertaining, and a decent amount of fun to play. You could easily find yourself powering through the entire game in a single sitting and have a good time soaking in its beautiful visual style and remarkable voice-work in spite of its flaws. It's just unfortunate that *The Gunk* offers little more than that. ■

STICKY SITUATIONS

How you spend your time in *The Gunk*

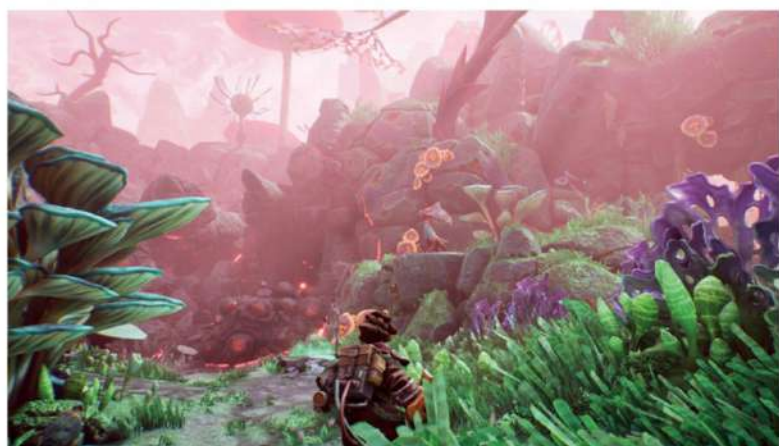


PC GAMER VERDICT

Despite the grungy title, *The Gunk*'s biggest success is in its clean visuals, once you've cleaned them up.

67

Look at that lovely, battered old spaceship.



FAR LEFT: You'll encounter various puzzles, but none too challenging.

LEFT: There's something very charming about how massive that robot arm is.



Nature is healing, now that the gunk's removed.

TACTICAL MISSTEP

THUNDER TIER ONE can't help but hamstring itself

By Lincoln Carpenter

It's midnight in Salobia. My squad's insertion to the derelict factory compound was clean – two patrols neutralised with just two suppressed shots each. And as two more sentries swing around the building's corner while I'm arming a breaching charge, my AI squadmates drop one of the gunmen before I can even react. We should be fine, I think, still believing that *Thunder Tier One* will play out like an action movie.

But then my squadmates stop shooting, even as the surviving patrolman answers with unsilenced barks from his rifle. I'm scrambling, pleading for them to fire – until I hear one of my comrades yell that he's throwing a frag. I watch in horror as he throws impossibly wide, confidently chucking his grenade into the wall just to his left. As it rolls back to detonate at his own feet, an alarm starts wailing. The mission fails. It won't be the last time.

Spun out of a personal project from a handful of *PUBG* devs, *Thunder Tier One* has pieces of a fun game buried in it somewhere. It's a simmy top-down shooter, promising elite agents and an elaborate loadout customisation system. Playing as an

operative of fictional multinational counterterrorist unit Thunder in the imaginary Eastern European nation of Salobia, there are stretches where that fantasy is allowed to shine.

Usually, it's while playing co-op, dismantling ultranationalist plots together in the nine mission campaign or in the Domination PvE objective mode. It's clearly the intended play experience: *Thunder Tier One* is at its best while creeping between cover picking off enemies with quick

bursts of fire. In a vacuum, its gunplay is tight and nimble, one of the rare games where squeezing off single rounds is intuitively more satisfying than spraying bullets.

Unfortunately, *Thunder Tier One* has an incredible talent for ruining its

Has an incredible talent for ruining its own fun

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A topdown shooter take on '90s-era tactical action from *PUBG* devs

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
KRAFTON, Inc.

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 8700k, 32GB RAM, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Yes, up to 4-player cooperative and 8-player competitive.

LINK
thundertierone.com

own fun. You'll be murdered by a finicky cover system, clunky camera controls, and AI soldiers who'll abruptly enter an inexplicable Kill Mode, graduating from stormtrooper inaccuracy to lethal marksmanship. Or you'll just happen to read the menu briefings and equipment descriptions, which read with the energy of your most boring uncle.

SQUAD WOES

Playing the campaign solo buries the fun even deeper beneath layers of frustrations. At first, your suite of options for commanding and equipping your three AI squadmates feels expansive. But the appeal doesn't last. Your squad only becomes more frustrating to grapple with, oscillating wildly between efficiency and incompetence. Sometimes, they're capable of eliminating waves of enemies in one volley of shots. A minute later, they'll decide that they just don't feel like shooting anymore.

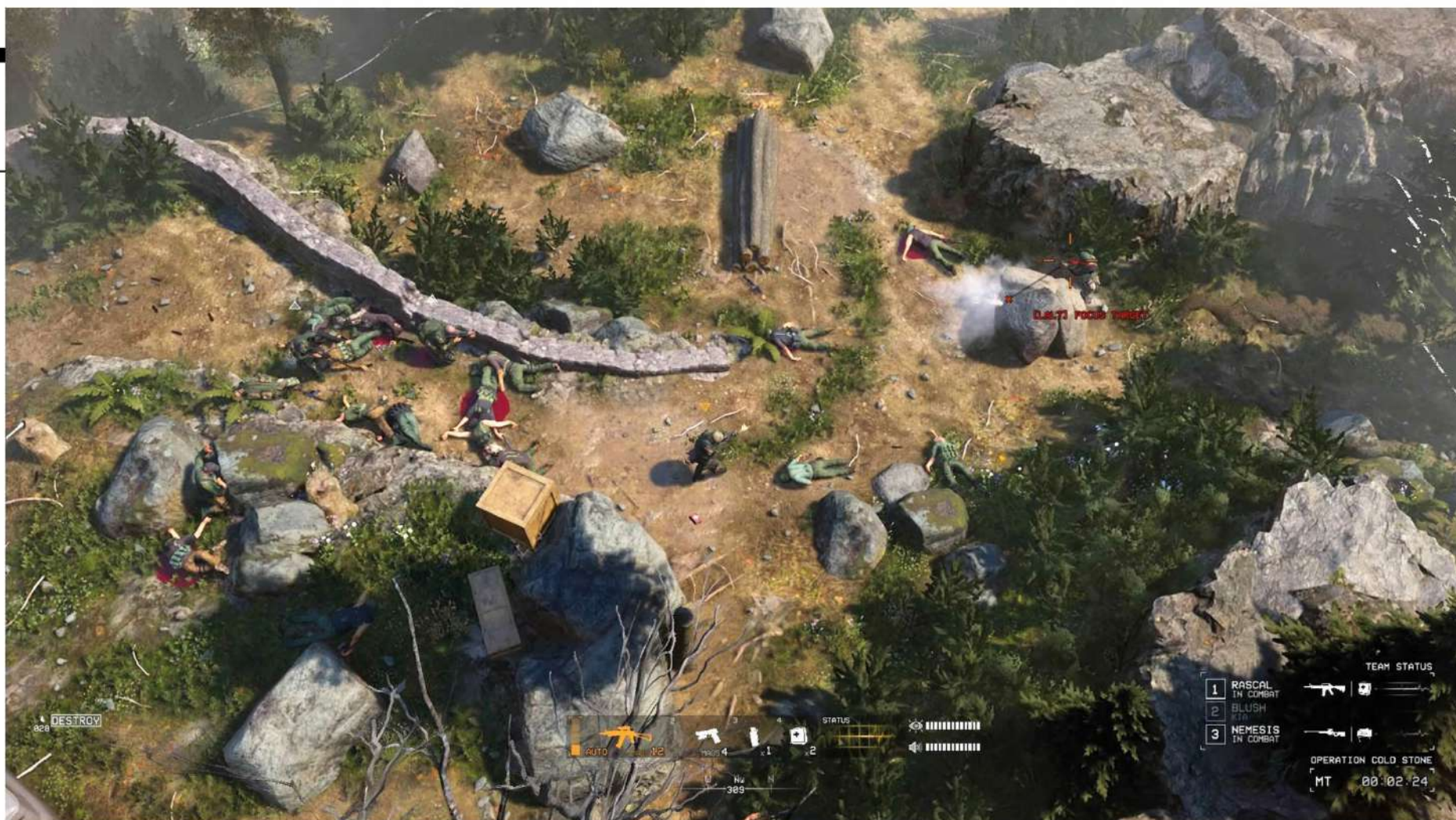
As soon as you start issuing commands, your squad stops acting on its own, aside from (theoretically) shooting at nearby enemies. Their self-preservation instincts evaporate. When ordered to a position, they'll



TOP: Salobian paramilitaries embrace the 'rustic ultranationalist chic' aesthetic.

RIGHT: The loadout screen, or 'rifle mag Jenga'.





TOP: They're all napping.

ABOVE: Admiring pretty lighting is standard military procedure.

squat, exposed, on open ground. When ordered to cover, they glue themselves there, never shifting position. Their pathfinding gets tripped up, leaving them vulnerable to a mortar barrage when they all try to rush through the same door.

My squadmates were my worst enemies. They're supposed to be lethal human weapons, but they only kill joy. And themselves.

You can't pause the action to issue commands. When enemy reinforcements inevitably appear to flank you, fumbling to reposition your squad is too sluggish to properly react. My missions became a matter of leaving my squad on autopilot and hoping the last checkpoint wasn't too far back. Fine-tuning gear loadouts loses its lustre, too. I was better off sticking with the same setup, with only slight variations.

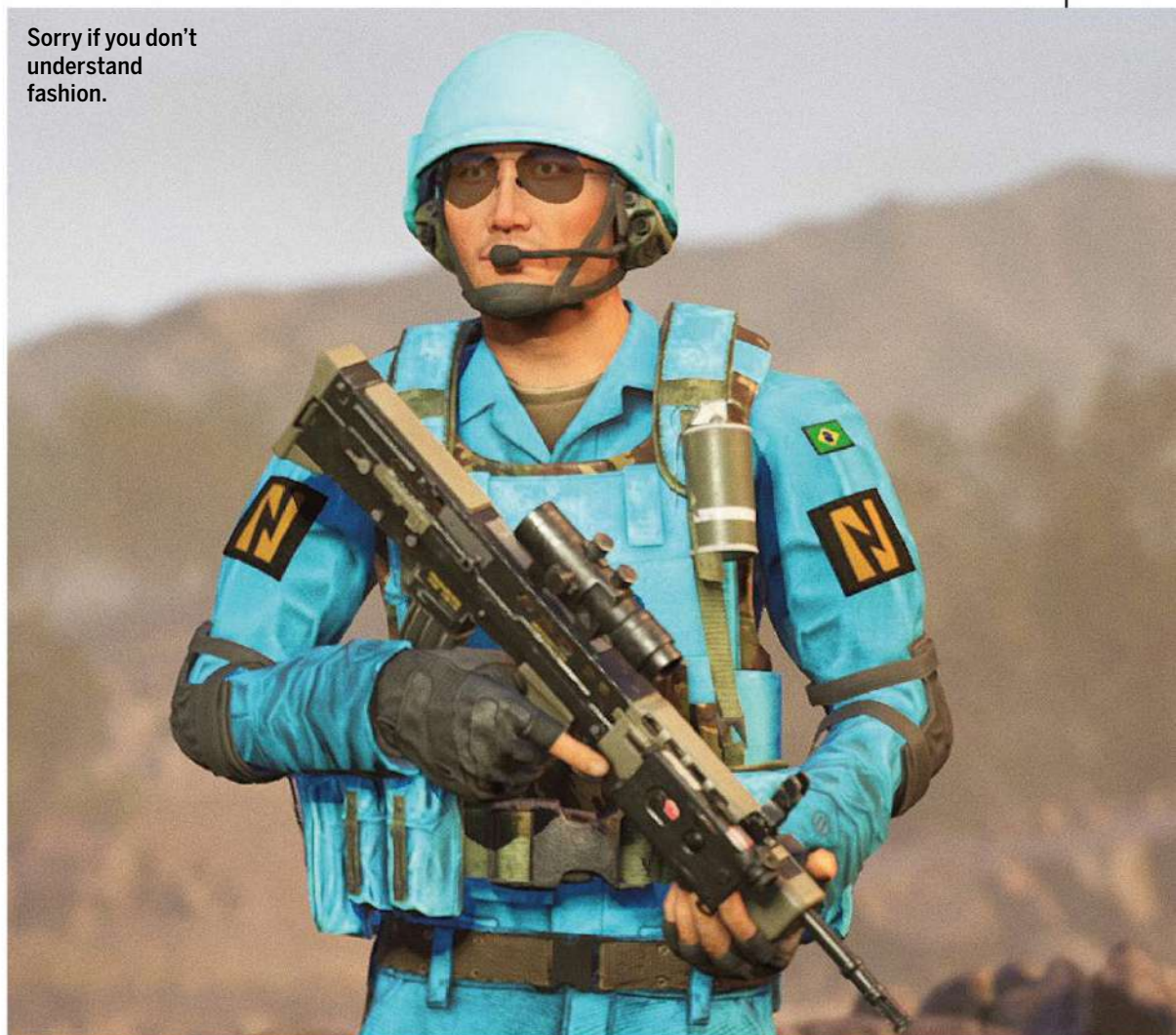
The shooting feels good enough that its PvP multiplayer is worth a try, though. Limited sight range and short killtimes make its small set of gametypes tense – but I only found a handful of populated servers. For the price point, there's some fun to be had with willing friends. But as a solo experience: pass. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Tight topdown shooting can't outshine *Thunder Tier One's* absolute truckload of mechanical frustrations.

61

Sorry if you don't understand fashion.



TIER ONE TEAMBUILDING

Your brothers in harms



THE FIRE HAZARD

Trusted with incendiary grenades. This is a mistake.



THE MEDIC

Indispensable. Perfect angel. Will die first.



YOU

Just trying your best out here. And that's all anyone can ask of you really.



THE PACKHORSE

Carrying every useful gadget until his body needs looting.

PARENTING TIPS

GOD OF WAR is the best version of a masterpiece

By Morgan Park

God of War is a PC game. That still felt weird to say as I wrapped up my second playthrough over the holidays. Not far above it on my Steam library sits another game that is 'of War' for a different master – *Gears 5*. Just a few years ago, these two tentpole series existing on the same device was impossible. Now they share a virtual shelf.

Sony's latest angry dad game is evidence that the PC is the ultimate videogame unifier, and a great reminder of how the platform can bring out the best in games. I've killed my way across Midgard at 30fps on a PS4 and 4K on PS5, but I don't think I can go back to either after 24 hours of buttery smooth monster chopping at 90fps. This is a damn good port, at least on my higher-end PC.

If you skipped the PlayStation release, or haven't touched the series at all, this is the *God of War* to play. All you need to know going in is that Kratos was Athena's best murder man until he was betrayed and decided to kill all of the gods (including his daddy, Zeus). This soft reboot picks up years later. In that time, Kratos left a now-godless Greece and wandered into

the Norse lands, where he gained a wife (who has just passed away at the start of the game), a son named Atreus, and a glorious beard.

DIVINE WRATH

Kratos left a now-godless Greece and wandered into the Norse lands

God of War has its restraint. It's a small story in a world of gigantic characters. Kratos and Atreus aren't out to save the world – they just want to spread their wife/mother's ashes on top of a big mountain.

They're not actually looking for a fight, but end up walking into a bunch of them because, apparently, Midgard has been a nightmare land of evil trolls, poison witches, and zombies for the last century or so. Much of the game is basically carving a path through this broken world and, unravelling the petty god drama that led to its ruin.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action RPG family road trip

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Sony Santa Monica

PUBLISHER
PlayStation PC

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3060, Ryzen 7 5700G 3.8Ghz, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
playstation.com/en-us/god-of-war

There's a lot of *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted* in its puzzly moments – hoisting young Atreus up a ledge to kick down a rope and jostling dilapidated supports to make a bridge are pages straight out of the Naughty Dog playbook – but these familiar puzzles get to have a lot of fun with Kratos' superhuman strength.

It's both cool and funny how often Atreus ponders how they're going to cross a gap just as Kratos lifts a beam the size of six cars or spins an entire building like it's a windup toy. Where Nathan Drake looks for a chain to lift an ancient pulley, Kratos simply throws his axe at the gears so hard that they spin. For a character that used to exclusively show his toughness by killing every living thing in the room, it's nice to see Kratos throw his weight around the world itself.

Lifting big rocks wouldn't be nearly as fun without the back and forth banter with Atreus (or as he's often called, "boy"). It's not exactly a new narrative trick to pair a strong silent type with an inquisitive youngster, but unlike the developing relationship of Joel and Ellie, Atreus and Kratos already have a layered rapport that's steadily peeled back over time. It's obvious from the starting off point that the two aren't actually close. Atreus is determined to prove he's ready to make the journey and pressured to live up to Kratos' high standards ("Do not be sorry. Be better," Kratos tells him after taking a careless shot at a deer). Kratos, meanwhile, is an emotionally distant father who projects his own issues on other people.

Their relationship evolves organically as they take on the world together, but Sony Santa Monica was smart to let side characters do some heavy lifting as well. One character introduced halfway through is easily the best part of the game, a wise old grandpa figure brimming with useful advice and stories to fill the dead air while the trio boat around Midgard.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Before he was in Midgard, Kratos did a lot of god killing



GOD OF WAR 2005

In Kratos' first outing he's tasked by Athena to kill Ares. Kratos has a major bone to pick with him already, so he agrees, does the job, and becomes the new god of war.



GOD OF WAR 2 2007

Kratos goes through the Underworld to turn back time to kill Zeus. He succeeds, but Athena sacrifices herself to save Zeus, also revealing that Kratos is Zeus' son.



GOD OF WAR 3 2010

Kratos brings back the Titans to destroy Olympus and exacts his revenge on Zeus. Kratos kills himself to release the power of hope for mankind, but survives and leaves Greece.



GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION 2013

Set before the first *God of War*, *Ascension* fills in some details about Kratos breaking his bond to Ares and coming to grips with his tortured past.





Atreus will automatically help Kratos in a fight with arrows, grabs, and special stun moves.



ABOVE: The only thing missing from this boating trip is a couple of fishing poles.



BELOW: "Boy, it is cold here."





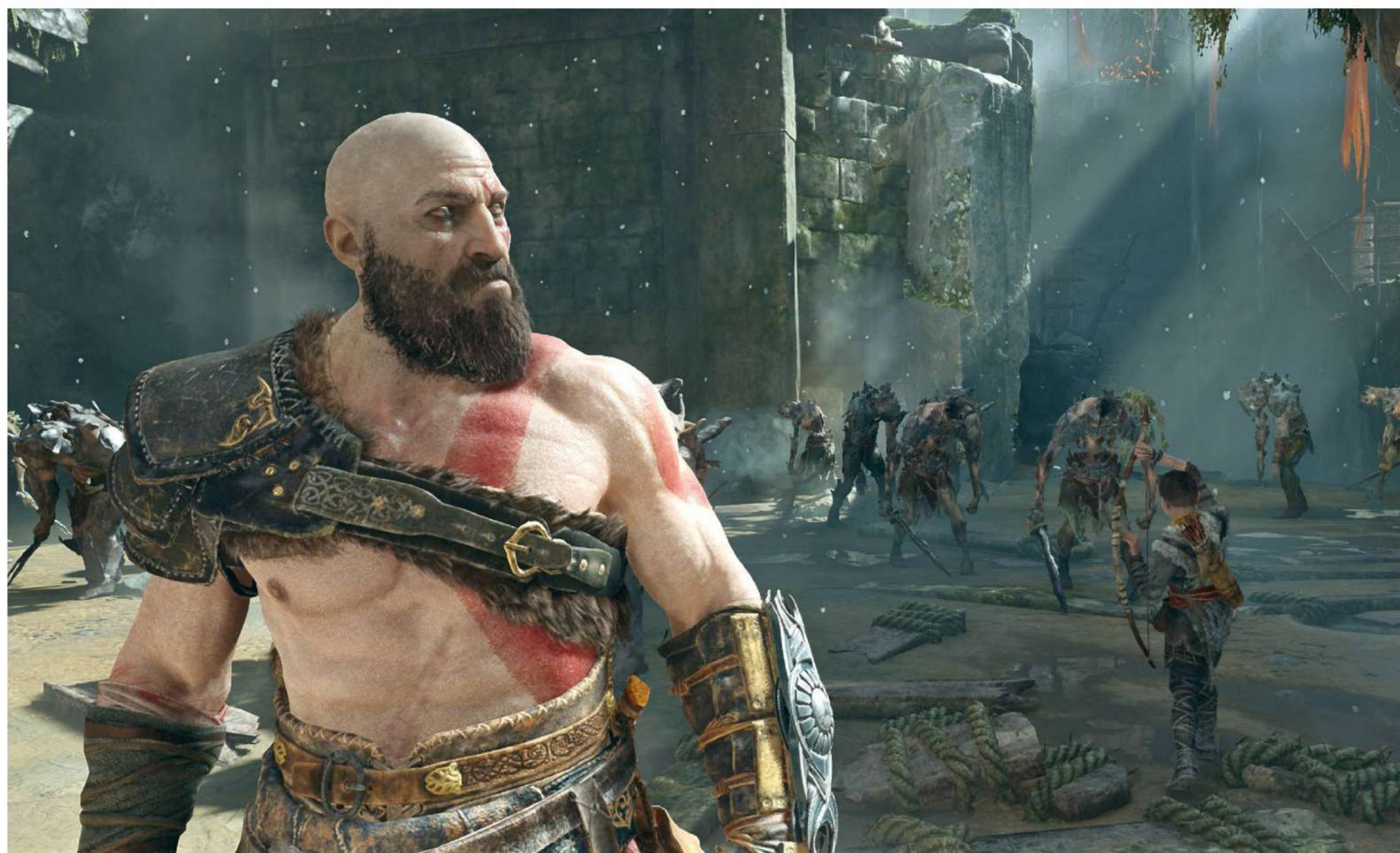
These rocky lava jerks will burn you up quick if you don't block.



FAR RIGHT: New axe aside, Kratos can still tap into his fiery god energy when needed.



BELOW: Never trust a room full of 'dead' upright soldiers.



» GOD BRAWLS

For as good as *God of War's* characters and stories are, my strongest memories all revolve around one of the greatest weapons in videogames: the Leviathan Axe. The axe is your primary weapon and do-it-all multitool throughout the entire game. It can pry open doors, destroy obstacles, freeze machinery in place, or be thrown the length of a football field to nab hard-to-reach loot. In combat, the Leviathan Axe is a gratifying balance of heft and speed that hits a lot harder than Kratos' old Blades of Chaos. Here, again, Sony Santa Monica leverages Kratos' supernatural might to let you do impossible things with an axe, such as cleaving three enemies in half with a single crushing move.

Then there's the Leviathan's other perk. You've probably seen cool gifs of Kratos throwing the axe at a draugr and recalling it back to his hand like Thor's hammer. It feels just as cool as it looks and doesn't stop being cool for dozens of hours. Axe combat translates surprisingly well to keyboard and mouse, too: left and right mouse are standard attacks and you have to hold Ctrl to ready a throw. It was a good sign for *God of War's* default keybindings when I instinctually called back the axe by pressing the standard R reload key and it totally worked. That said, reaching for Ctrl might become a nuisance after a while if you don't have pinkies of steel.

You can chuck it like a boomerang for a quick attack that bounces off

enemies or throw it overhead for a harder hit that sticks and freezes them in place. It often made sense for me to leave that pinned enemy in place, because axe-less Kratos can still fight with his two meaty fists.

Because nothing in *God of War* goes to waste, unarmed combat is an entirely different beast with its own skill tree and advantages. Blunt blows

don't deal as much damage as the axe obviously, but they do fill enemy stagger meters super fast. Once fully staggered, Kratos can seal the deal with an instant execution straight out of

Doomguy's library of

Kratos can seal the deal with an instant execution

glory kills. These spectacular kills are so satisfying that I was constantly looking for an excuse to lose the axe and go full boxer mode. Backing up Kratos at all times is Atreus, who has a dedicated button to command him to shoot arrows at whoever you happen to be targeting.

This on-the-fly weapon swapping creates these fun improvisational brawls that compliment every fighting style. I can keep spamming light attack, or I could go full galaxy brain by pinning the biggest guy in place with the axe, beating fodder zombies to a pulp, and recalling the axe at just the right angle to slice through an enemy on the way back. When the stars align, I'm chaining moves in a literal combat loop.

Everything matters at the same time, even if I could one-trick with the axe through most of the game. You get more cool stuff as the story progresses that you're best off seeing yourself, so much that I was a little

overwhelmed by choice in the back half of the game.

NORSE CODE

My second *God of War* playthrough was my best playthrough, and it had everything to do with the higher framerate I enjoyed with this PC port. Like *Days Gone* and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* before it, *God of War* flies on a good PC. On an RTX 3060 at 1920x1080, I was able to crank up the target fps to 90 and mostly stay there with Nvidia DLSS set to Quality. I noticed things got a little choppier during doorway transitions to the open-world lake area, but the frames would steady after a while.

God of War also runs fine without DLSS, though at this point, Nvidia's upscaling technology has gotten so good I'm not sure why you'd ever flip it off if it's available. Little issues that plagued earlier versions of DLSS (like that weird ghosting effect you'd see on the small floating particles) are cleaned up nowadays, and what's left is an AI-assisted upscaled image that I can hardly discern from a native 1080p image. The magic trick may be a little less convincing if you scale it down to Balanced or Ultra Performance, but Quality is a safe bet for 1080p gaming. As for 1440p or 4K, I'm unfortunately ill-equipped to give it a go.

DLSS isn't the only flavour or upscaling supported by *God of War*, either. You can alternatively flip on AMD's FidelityFX Super Resolution. I don't have as much experience with this one, but I noticed a bit more blurriness when set to Quality. It's still good, and as a frame-hungry PC gamer, I'd keep it on if it was my only choice available to me.

It's exciting to think about what *God of War's* landing on PC could mean for the console exclusive status quo. Sony has a dedicated PC publishing label now. As it gets more serious about PC ports, will we ever get to the point where its games release on PC months after launch instead of years? Could it even pull a Microsoft and drop everything on PC at the same time as console? That's probably a stretch, but *God of War* is a great sign. ■

GEAR FOR WAR

Everything you need for a peaceful family hike

1 LEVIATHAN AXE

The axe of Kratos' late wife. As sharp as it is cold, this axe will always return to its owner when called.

2 SPARTAN SHIELD

A memento from his Sparta days, Kratos' shield is wrist-mounted and unfolds to its full size when needed.



3 BAG OF ASHES

The ashes of Kratos' late wife, Faye, stored in little baggie that somehow never leaks or spills.

4 THE LIGHT OF ALFHEIM

You may have to fight through an army of dark elves to find it, but this power source is handy for lighting the way in caves.



PC GAMER VERDICT

One of the best games on PS4 is now one of the best games on PC. A masterful, cinematic adventure.

90

VENE, VIDI, RPG

EXPEDITIONS: ROME wasn't built in a day, but did it really take this long?

By Robert Zak

It's taken me hours but finally I've built a digital legacy for Robertus Atellius Somethingus that's worthy of the glory of Rome. I've assembled legions that have conquered Asia Minor, North Africa and Gaul, I've besieged cities, toppled senators, assassinated enemies with my Wild Bunch of praetorians, plus impressed a particularly horny Cleopatra, and her god complex, with my arrogance. It's a solid CV for anyone applying for the role of Ancient Roman Consul.

Expeditions: Rome is a historical RPG with elements of strategy that sees you conquering much of the classical world while navigating high-level Roman politics on the home front.

Fiddly RPG traits like levelling, trade and inventory management are simplified, which you may be grateful for in a game that still manages to clock in at 70-plus hours.

You'll spend much of the game running around with six companions. There's enough banter between these ragtag Romans to build up some fondness for them, but unfortunately their sidequests – like most sidequests in the game – struggle to squeeze in around the main story, like jam barely clinging to the edges of an overstuffed sandwich.

In fairness, there's little time for getting cosy with companions when you've got an entire Roman legion to manage. As a member of an esteemed

Roman family under threat from a powerful senator dead set on your extinction, you get shipped out to a Roman army trying to retake Asia Minor. Before long, you rise to the

position of legate, commanding a thousands-strong Roman legion while running around with your crack squad on clandestine missions like assassinations, disrupting enemy supply lines and trying

to expose the corruption of the rival Roman family out for your head.

A good part of the game is spent on an overworld map, from which you can send your party of praetorians and your army on missions around the land. You use the legion to take over the map and procure resources for upgrading your encampment with things like barracks, a forge and a bath house, where stationing a praetorian with the 'Social' trait will steadily increase

Really shines in its attention to historical detail

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
 Historical RPG with strategy elements set in an alternative-history Rome

EXPECT TO PAY
 £30

DEVELOPER
 Logic Artists

PUBLISHER
 THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
 Ryzen 7 5800H, Nvidia GeForce 3070 (mobile), 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
 No

LINK
expeditionsseries.com

the morale of your legion (standing around naked in a bath house 24/7 with a number of fellow soldiers was certainly an invaluable role in my military hierarchy).

The legion battle system through which you take over large chunks of the world is rather simplistic, and once I realised it was little more than a numbers game I'd simply auto-resolve battles. The meatier portion of the game is spent with your party of praetorians, with whom you get to explore cities, chat to NPCs and engage in turn-based combat. I particularly enjoyed the random events as you traverse the overworld map, which give some well-written flavour to the people, customs and superstitions to each region you explore (Asia Minor in Act 1, North Africa in Act 2, Gaul in Act 3).

The turn-based combat ticks all the boxes, and even adds its own flourishes like being able to take partial turns and switch freely between your different characters. There's an eternal satisfaction to throwing down caltrops that force enemies to run straight into a death field overwatched by your archer, or by pelting the pharaoh of Egypt and his elite guard with fire bombs then encircling them with your troops.

DONE ROMAN

You're always fighting *a lot* of enemies however, which means that at the end of each turn you can spend two minutes watching over a dozen enemy, friendly and civilian units zigzagging around a hex-based battlefield. The option to avoid combat through, say, stealth or sweet-talking diplomacy would've been handy here, but the game *really* wants you to fight, and by the latter stages an irrelevant 30-minute battle triggered by a random event just feels like it's getting in the way of more pressing matters.

Expeditions: Rome really shines in its attention to historical detail. A flexible overhead camera lets you

ROMAN CONQUESTS

The finest games set during the age of the Imperium



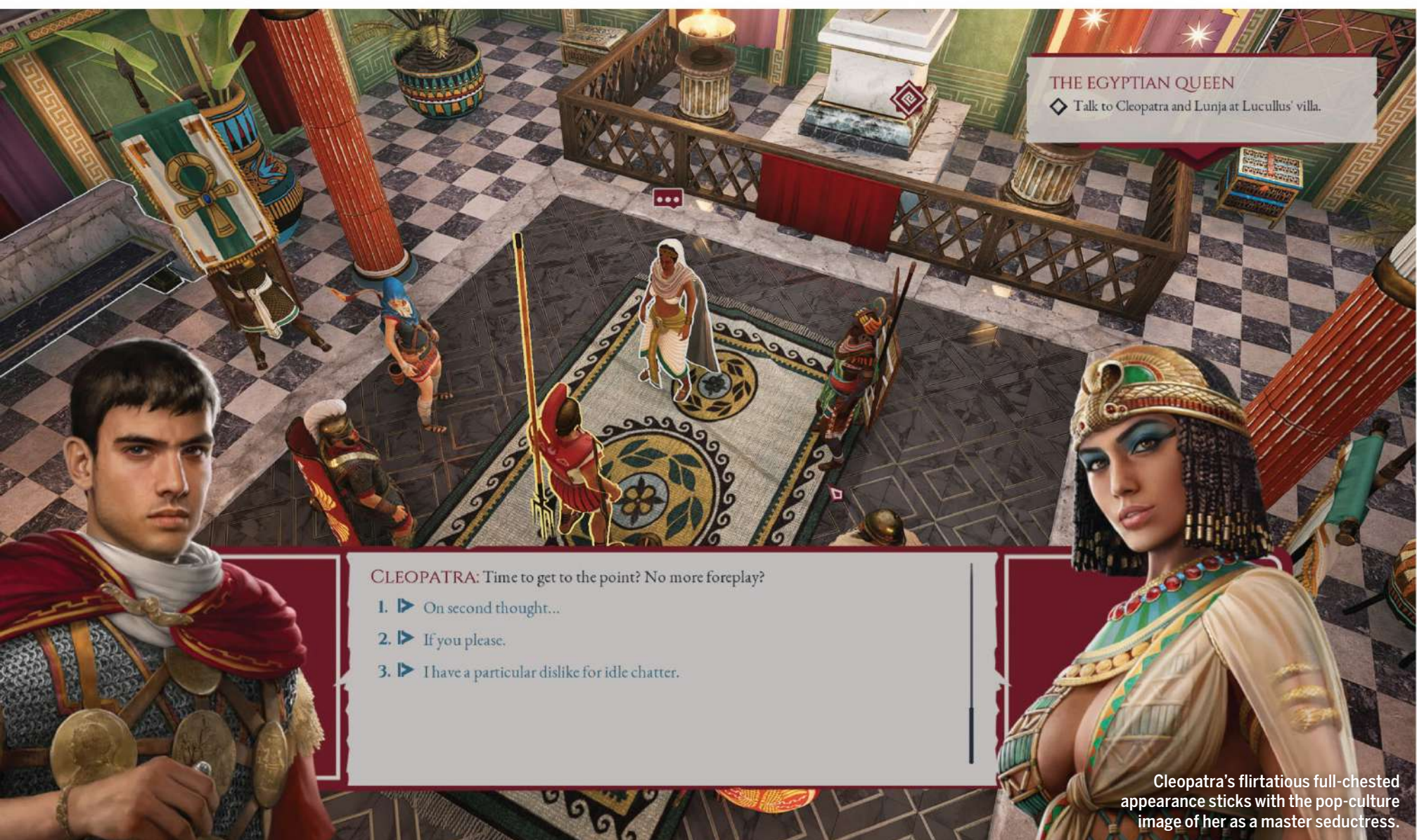
TOTAL WAR: ROME II
 The internal politics of Rome interfere and overlap with your machinations on the battlefield, as you strategise and lead Rome – or its rivals – to glory across a vast historical campaign.



IMPERATOR: ROME
 If you're more interested in the schemings of the nobles and politicians of the senate than the battlefield, then Paradox's grand strategy deep-dive into Roman history could be more your speed.



RYSE: SON OF ROME
 Ryse is the closest thing gaming has to the movie *Gladiator*. It's a scripted cinematic adventure that sees you hack-and-slaying your way through stunning historical backdrops.



CLEOPATRA: Time to get to the point? No more foreplay?

1. ▶ On second thought...
2. ▶ If you please.
3. ▶ I have a particular dislike for idle chatter.

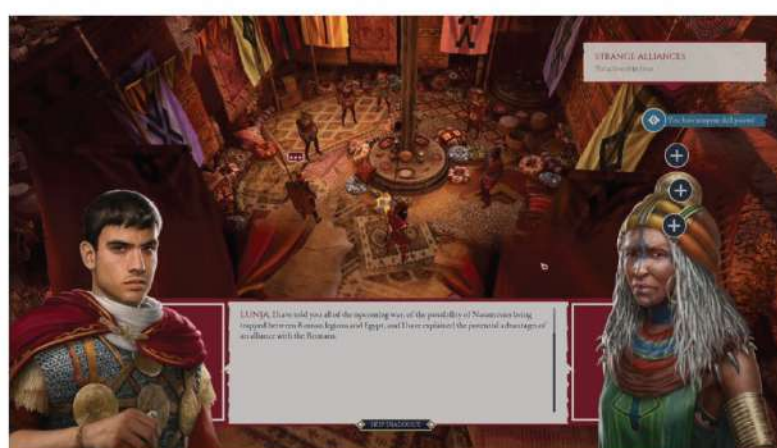
Cleopatra's flirtatious full-chested appearance sticks with the pop-culture image of her as a master seductress.



ABOVE: The turn-based combat is intense and not always forgiving. Have that quick-save finger primed.



Use legion encampments to replenish your armies, treat your praetorians and upgrade your weapons.



ABOVE: Many of the indoor areas are richly textured and filled with fine details that at the very least seem to be historically considered.

zoom in to appreciate the finely patterned floor tiling of Roman villas, and discern the hieroglyphs and vibrant drawings in Egyptian tombs. Weapons and armours, meanwhile, all have Latin names and what I can only presume are historically faithful designs (either way, they look lovely). It familiarises you with the salutations, customs, weaponry, even diets, of the ancient world's denizens while delivering a sweeping story of war and politics that also feels historically grounded despite letting you shape that history. Somewhat predictably, part of that is allowing you to cavort with an Egyptian

goddess-queen. That historical angle, and the journey it takes you on across three distinct regions of the ancient world, makes this a worthwhile expedition, especially if you're interested in the era. Like the good Roman legate you are however, you'll need to remain stoic in the face of some friction along the way. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Expeditions: Rome is an uneven epic whose historical richness guides it through some awkward pacing while playing.

73

TEXT MECHS

WOLFSTRIDE's cheap humour betrays its smart storytelling and intriguing setting

By Josh Broadwell

So, a dog, a gangster, and a witch walk into a bar. This is where you expect me to say “stop me if you’ve heard this one before”, but I won’t because you haven’t. *Wolfstride* from Ota Imon is different from other games, a self-described RPG for grown-ups that wallows a bit too frequently in immature humour. *Wolfstride* never fully builds on its narrative promise, but the setting and cast make it a spin on an often stagnant genre.

With its dramatic opening, you’d be forgiven for thinking *Wolfstride* was faster paced than it is. The curtain first rises on one of those mech battles, where your loveable but doofy pilot Knife Leopard (aka Pineapples, for some reason) faces off against a hardened criminal type in a rigged robot fight. Elsewhere, Dominic Shade, the team leader, refuses to throw the match. But with one squeak of a deadly dog toy in retaliation, Pineapples’ mech explodes.

That’s as much action as you’ll see for a long while. Shade and friends settle into a routine of exploring Rain City and desperately throwing themselves at any opportunity to earn money. You have 63 in-game days to

fix your shattered mech Cowboy and prove yourselves in another match. But the way *Wolfstride* gradually rolls out its story means much of that time feels like it’s not well used.

THROWING SHADE

I grew to care about the bizarre people of Rain City

Shade gets access to a few part-time jobs eventually, which function as money-earning methods as much as they do ways to break up the repetitive action. While the goal is pouring that cash back into Cowboy for arena fights, *Wolfstride* is a visual novel about a group of shady middle-aged heroes down on their luck more than it is an action-packed RPG.

Focusing on an older, and frankly unlikable, cast of characters is

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A strange adventure of menial jobs, mech fights, and poo jokes

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Ota Imon

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON
GTX 2070, 16 GB RAM, i7-10875H

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
rawfury.com/games/wolfstride

refreshing, unique, and kept me far more interested in seeing how Shade’s story unfolded than the mech fights did. The thing is, *Wolfstride* is never sure what to do with itself, and leans too heavily into the ‘immature’ part of its ‘immature grown up RPG’ tagline. Every time I started settling into the story, *Wolfstride* threw something ridiculous and unnecessary at me – an entire character arc revolving around a robot called Peepoo, for example.

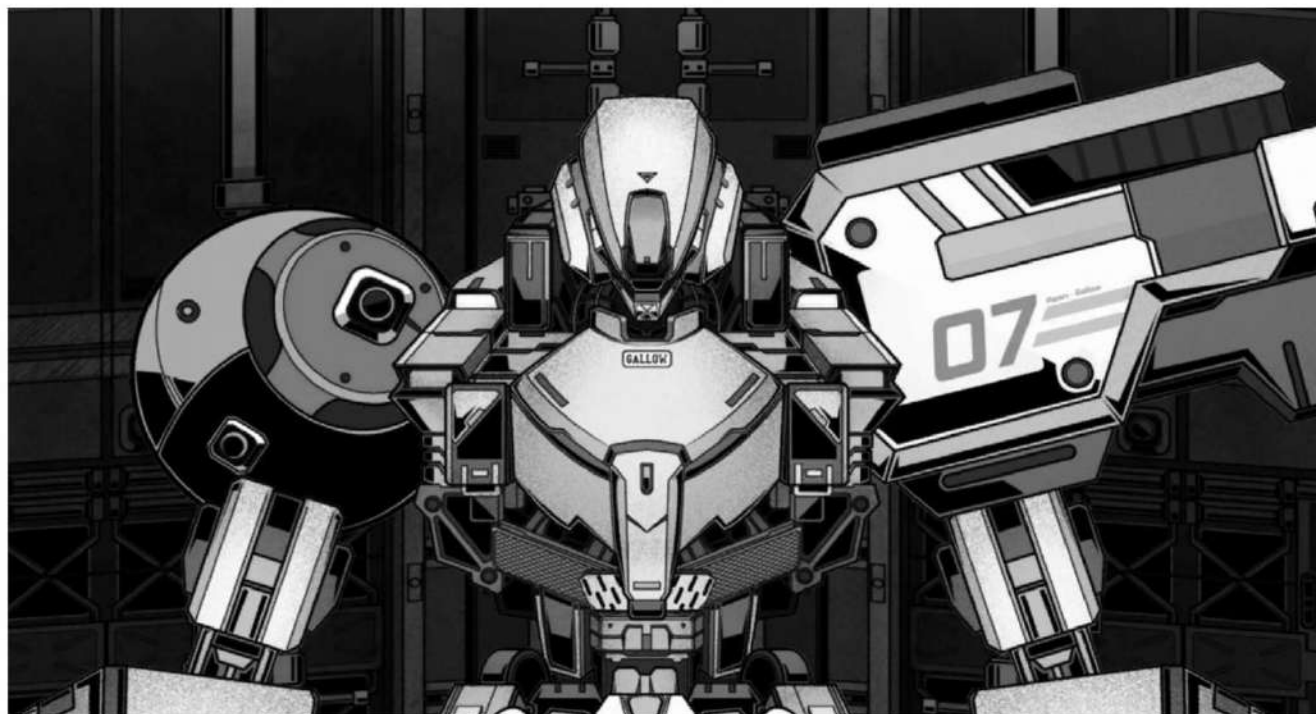
Despite their predilection for spouting obnoxious jokes, however, I grew to care about the bizarre people of Rain City. The city itself plays a substantial role in that attachment, a jazzy, multicultural metropolis with a surprisingly distinct sense of place. One derelict street feels much the same as another early in *Wolfstride*, but as you unlock more areas, it gradually gives you greater insight into Shade’s world and how he ended up where he is.

The environmental storytelling helps flat and static characters appear more interesting. Few other casts exist for comparison, with the closest being *Yakuza: Like A Dragon*’s band of misfits, but *Wolfstride*’s



TOP: There's far more exploring and talking than mecha combat action.

RIGHT: The mechs do look very cool though.





TOP: The story never quite finds its tone...

ABOVE: ...but it's full of likable, weird characters.

characters seem even more relatable than Ichiban and his friends. You feel the struggle when Joy talks about life's hardships and her need to bring in the money because you see it every time you travel anywhere in Rain City.

While the mech fights aren't as detailed as some, there's a solid combat system waiting for you once you finally get back in the cockpit. *Wolfstride* makes you balance between brute force and carefully planned defence in a continuous dance of give and take.

The only downside is you see most of what *Wolfstride* has to offer early on. A dearth of skill types and a small battlefield mean there's little room for strategy, which is a shame. *Wolfstride*'s combat is as fresh as its take on RPG casts, and I hope Ota Imon gets the chance to create a more expansive system in the future.

For all its faults, *Wolfstride* still captivates with its flawed heroes and sheer confidence. Dividing the focus between off-kilter humour and an interesting tale of regret and redemption was not the best choice, but that scattered approach doesn't stop this being a memorable tale. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Ota Imon has something interesting to say with *Wolfstride*. I just hope it finds the right voice to say it with next time.

70

That's the face of someone up to no good. With mechs.

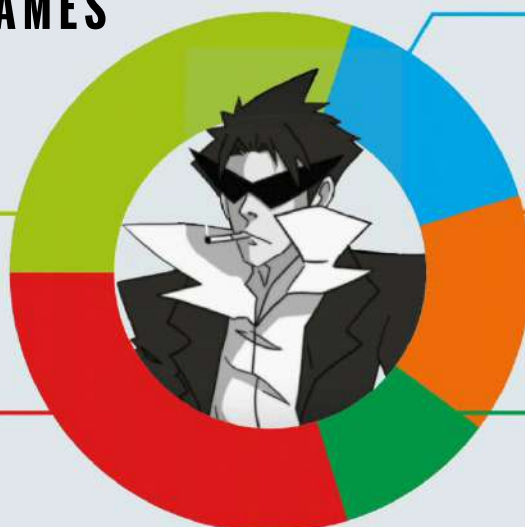


LET THE GAMES BEGIN

Take it in (Wolf)stride

30% SCRAPING BY
After the opening fight, you'll have to work hard to bounce back.

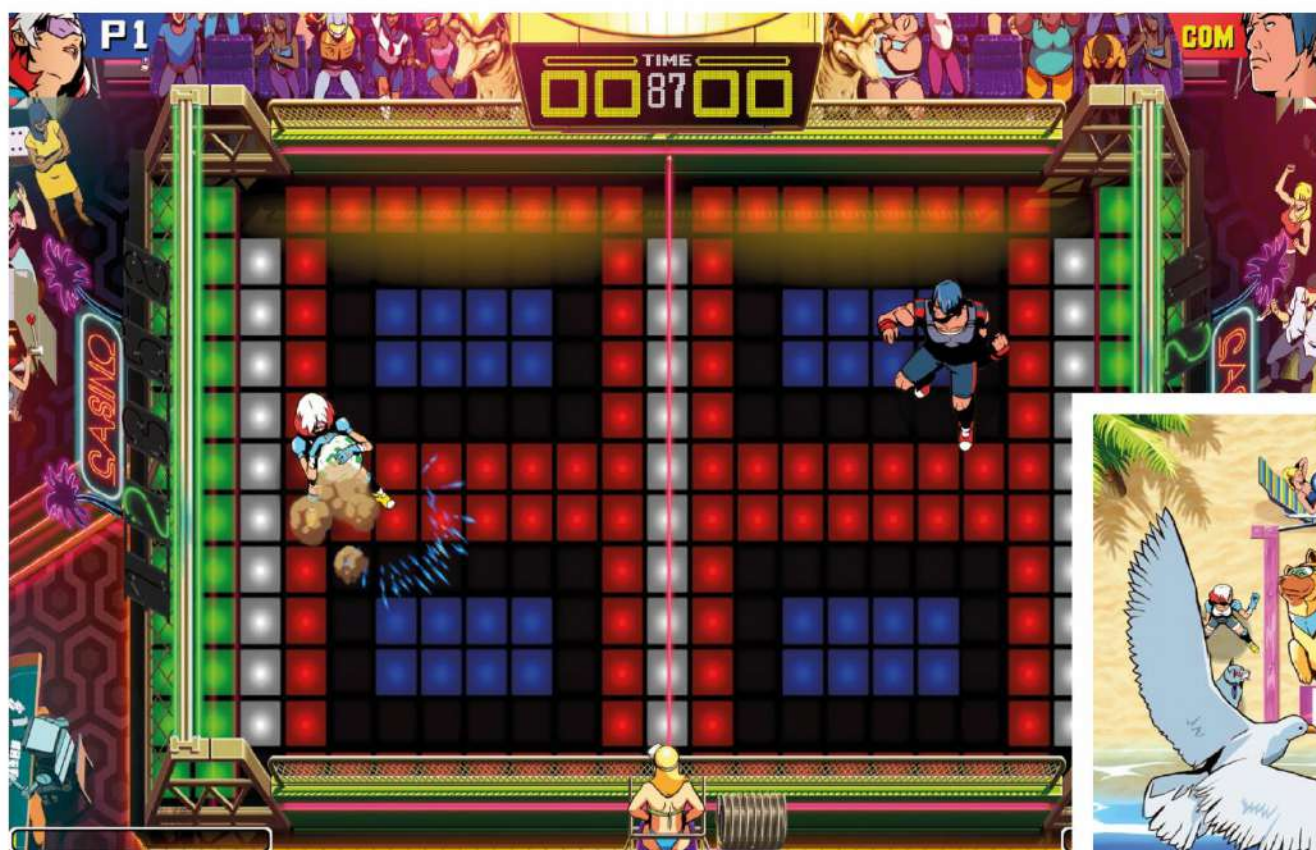
30% BAD GAGS
Get ready to endure a lot of toilet humour before the end.



15% MECH FIGHTS
There's very little robotic action, but what's there is tactical and fun.

15% CITY SLICKIN'
Exploring Jazz City is slow, but it's got an excellent sense of place.

10% BDSM BIKING
It's... it's actually pretty difficult to explain this part of the game.



ABOVE: You get to compete in a range of increasingly absurd locales including this casino.

FAR RIGHT: The game is seldom less than totally OTT.

BELOW: Anticipating your foe's next move is the key to staying ahead.



NINETIES THROWBACK

To Frisbee or not to Frisbee, in **WINDJAMMERS 2**

By Samantha Greer

Did you know, windjammer was a slang term for a sailing ship once upon a time? I could not have guessed from the name alone that *Windjammers* was also a lesser known '90s sports game about two opponents locked in competitive Frisbee. Is this a real sport? Not really, but a quick search showed me there is Ultimate Frisbee. In all I've learned so much from *Windjammers 2*, I only wish it was better at teaching me about itself.

No surprise if you've never heard of the original, there's been over two decades between its release and this sequel. The fundamentals of the two are more or less the same. Not just in its controls and design but in the throwback vibe of its aesthetics too. While it's no longer in 8-bit, these slick hand drawn looking sprites capture those same bold colours to convey an idolised '90s feel good world where the sun is always shining and we're all here to have a good time.

Matches are straightforward, each round you're served a Frisbee with points attached to it which are awarded to the first player to either hit their opponents back wall or make them fail to catch it. Specials allow you to knock through opponents defences or move the Frisbee faster but the depth comes from all the various ways you can curve your throw or build up speed with ricochets or counters. Even on the easy difficulty setting, there is a steep learning curve here and you'll need fast reaction times to stand a chance. Don't let all the smiles and sunshine fool you, *Windjammers* is as brutal as they come.

When you master it though, its rapid pace is enthralling. When you start you'll be making basic throws and managing little back and forth but soon, games become a frenzy of countering and special moves.

You have several superstars to play as, all in delightful costumes with over the top, heavy duty protective gear. They each have varying levels of power and speed,

determining their throw and movement respectively, as well as unique special moves which are really only discovered through play. In fact, the only thing the game has in

way of a tutorial is a 'how to play' section on the main menu which really only runs down the fundamentals of the controls. The nuances of play and the significant differences between characters, are only really learned

through matches which means eating a lot of losses. Something that might have been fine were there an involved singleplayer mode to sink your teeth

When you master it though, its rapid pace is enthralling

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A disc throwing sports game

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Dotemu

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 7,
Nvidia GeForce
GTX-970, Intel
i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
dotemu.com/game/windjammers-2

into yet *Windjammers* offers precious little to those playing alone.

FLYING DISCS

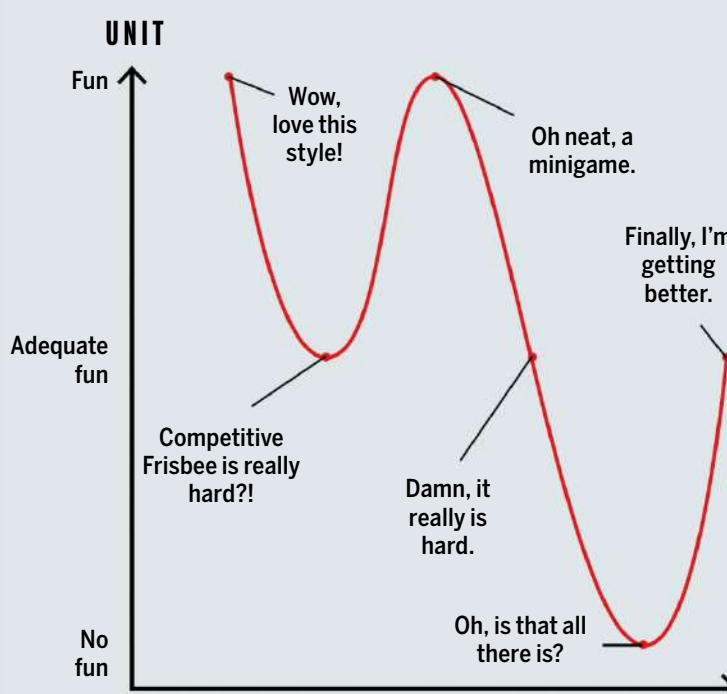
Leaning on its arcade roots *Windjammers* sticks to three modes, with two simply being a choice of playing online against other players and offline against friends or the computer. Arcade is the closest it gets to a singleplayer campaign, changing together matches and interspersing it with minigames for a change of pace. The minigame where you throw a Frisbee for a dog is wonderful and hints at the kind of carefree energy the game could've had in spades if it allowed more alternative activities between the intense matches. Alas, it's all pretty bare bones, the inverse of its visual excess.

At the right price its no frills modes will be just fine for those looking for a little novelty arcade experience with pals but there's little here besides. Hardcore *Windjammers* fans will probably be able to mine the nuances of its simple mechanics for maximum depth. I'm sure I'd be impressed watching high level players having a heated back and forth. For us amateurs there's plenty of style to soak up but little of real value to hold attention for more than a couple of hours.

Windjammers 2 feels like a failure to bring this classic game to a new generation and just as its style is trapped in the aesthetics of years gone by, so too is its approach to design. For some this will be a welcome call back but I imagine most will be left wondering what the fuss is about. Looking at these oldies clutching their neon Frisbees wondering... this is really what you were all into? OK, grandma. ■

DISC MASTER

The highs and lows of competitive Frisbee



PC GAMER VERDICT

Windjammers 2 is a stylish arcade throwback that delights while it lasts but sadly has little to offer in the long run.

70

BUSTER KEEPIN'

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE INTERGRADE paints a future in classic colours

By Oscar Taylor-Kent

Final Fantasy VII Remake has arrived on PC months after its PlayStation release, at a price of £70. The hope was for a definitive version, but at launch, I can't say this is it. Which is incredibly disappointing, because in spite of Square Enix giving it the kind of PC port the publisher is infamous for – not as bad as *Nier: Automata*, but still somewhat underwhelming – the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* is excellent and great to play.

After the lacklustre, confused, and unfinished-feeling *Final Fantasy XV*, this new take on one of the most beloved games in the series feels like it truly has vision. It balances faithfully recreating the original 1997 game (1998 if you first played it on PC like I did, giving me a lasting appreciation for the MIDI soundtrack), while commenting on the source material in a way that makes it feel up-to-date. The combat system is now fully real-time, though in a way that finally manages to honour the classic RPG legacy of the series.

The biggest caveat is that, despite the title, *FFVII* only retells the opening of the original game – the portion set in the grimy, industrial city of Midgar, where the wealthy live in comfort on gigantic plates of metal, while the poor live in the shadows beneath next to piles of scrap and waste. While originally the Midgar section could take about 10 hours, here it's transformed into a 35-40 hour adventure that feels more complete in its own right. As everything reaches a dramatic climax, it makes sense to close the book there (until the inevitable sequel).

LET'S MOSEY

The broad sweep remains the same. An aloof and grumpy merc named Cloud joins a cell of eco-terrorists who target the planet-killing Mako Reactors used by the Shinra company to power the cyberpunk-fantasy city of Midgar. It's a serious story full of environmental mysticism and melodramatic twists, undercut by

goofy elements like chocobos and the infamous quest where Cloud sneaks into a bad guy's lair by cross-dressing (recontextualised here as a dance-off rhythm game that basically has Cloud

compete in Drag Race, which celebrates the stoic grump embracing his feminine side).

The remake takes this original as a blueprint, and expands it with extra quests, added character depth and motivations, even

whole new story arcs. Pulling in from the original's top-down view to a closer, third-person camera makes the extra detail feel natural. It really

A serious story full of mysticism and melodramatic twists

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of *Final Fantasy VII*

EXPECT TO PAY
£70

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 1700X,
Gigabyte RTX 2080
Super, 32Gb RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
epicgames.com/store/en-US/p/final-fantasy-vii-remake-intergrade

adds to the feeling that *FFVII* stands as a complete chapter.

The Midgar portion of the original game wasn't exactly open-world, and neither is the remake. Only a handful of chapters push the brakes to let Cloud wander around a hub and take on sidequests. Others are more linear. After the destruction of a Mako Reactor early in the game, you'll walk among the panicking populace, and really feel connected to the people around you as they desperately search for loved ones amid the wreckage. In the original game, that section was only two screens long.

Another highlight is a brand new chunk of story that has you traverse a quiet residential district for Shinra employees. There, you get a sense of what life is like for those who are ignorant of the planet's plight.

While the mix of ironwork scrapyards and neon-lit streets is incredibly pretty throughout, dungeon-like areas are more mundane and static. The extra Intergrade episode, originally DLC for the PlayStation version, has levels that benefit from a little more interactivity. It's centred on Yuffie, a character who didn't appear until later in the original game. Flipping switches with ranged attacks and clambering up walls like the ninja she is results in much more interesting exploration than Cloud is ever faced with. Her combat style, a mix of close- and long-range fighting, is terrific fun too. Her section is not only short, but it shows how the remake could evolve its way towards a more interesting second chapter.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Besides your first trip to the hazy red-light district of Wall Market, where doing favours for locals plays into the plot, *FFVII* is better off for sticking to an action-packed pace most of the time. Cloud's person-sized Buster Sword isn't for show, after all. Whenever you're not taking detours to open treasure boxes for

KILLING TIME

Try out some distractions along the way



FORT CONDOR

The original game's tower defence mode gets remade as a boardgame Yuffie can play.



CAT-TASTROPHE

Some sidequests have you fight monsters. Others have you track down some of Midgar's cats.



REVVING UP

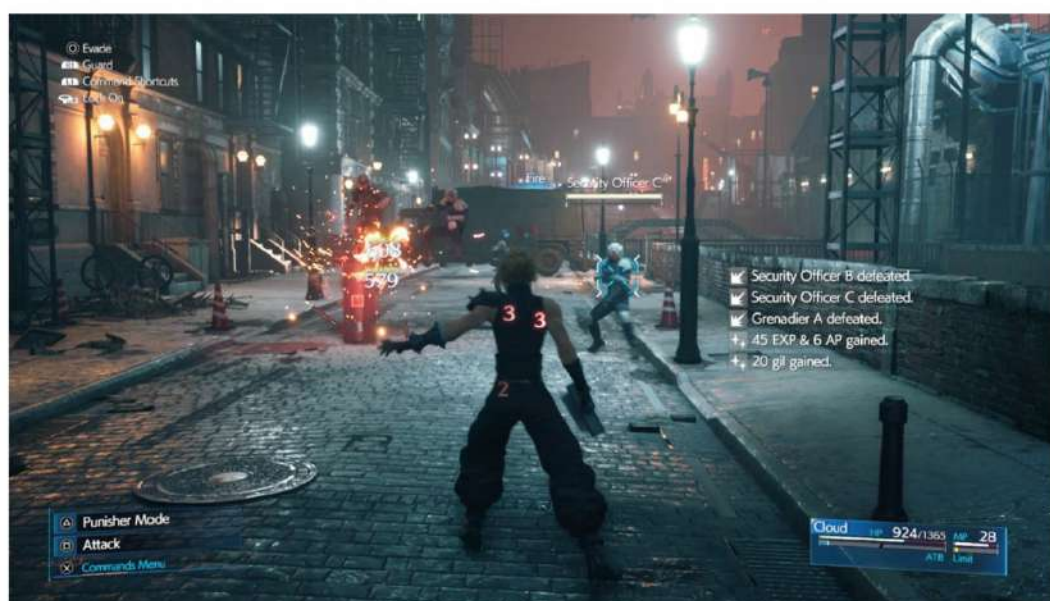
Motorbike sections return, and feel as fast-paced as ever. Though where's G-Bike? *FFVII-2*, maybe?



DARTS

Your JPRG too modern for fishing? Then it has to have darts. Can you get a high score?

Leo DiCaprio should get pointing – there's a lot of visual callbacks in Remake.



LEFT: Yuffie can wall-run and hit switches at a distance. Her dungeons massively benefit from the extra interactivity.



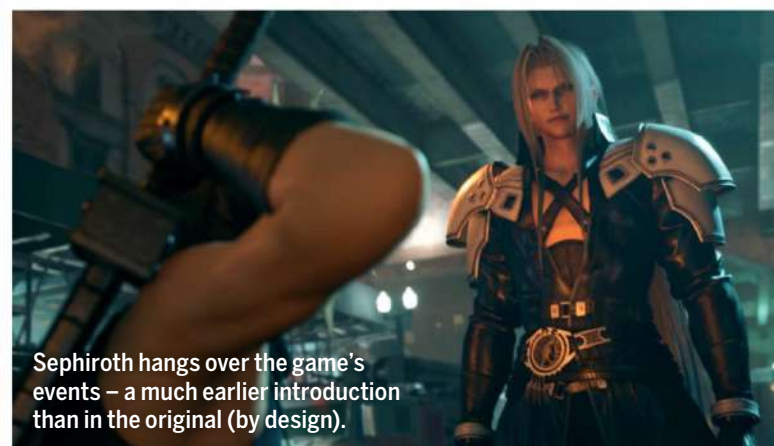
FAR LEFT: Different enemy types have different weaknesses.



Cutscenes are wonderfully over-the-top, leading to many fist-punching popcorn-worthy moments.



Quiet moments, when they come, are great. The character writing makes you want to stick around these lovable heroes.



Sephiroth hangs over the game's events – a much earlier introduction than in the original (by design).

RIGHT: Combat is flashy and responsive, with enough depth to draw you in when you get fiddling.

FAR RIGHT: You really feel like you're inhabiting lived-in streets. The visual design is great.



Large creepy monsters prowl the underside of Midgar. Don't flush pets down toilets.

» potions, you'll be whacking enemies with all sorts of oversized weapons.

Using standard attacks and blocking charges the Active Time Battle bar, chunks of which can be spent to take special actions. Time slows to a crawl when you do, mimicking the original game's turn-based combat as you select abilities from the menu like Cloud's heavy-hitting Focused Thrust or Barret's Lifesaver, as well as spells. Even using items like potions costs a chunk of the bar.

While it's possible to hack your way through many fights, sooner or later you're going to need to actually figure out how to get the most out of your crew. You can switch between controlling them directly, or command them to use abilities when their ATB bar fills while sticking with your favourite.

Each party member has a unique attack. For Cloud, that's the Punisher Stance, where blocks become auto-parries at the cost of mobility and ranged defence. Barret's is a charged shot that can be fired between longer bursts from his gun-arm. Keep up pressure on enemies, or hit them with attacks they're weak to, and they'll stagger, overcharging your damage (all the way up to 200%).

Often you'll need to choose between going on the attack to stagger an enemy or taking the opportunity to heal. Harder fights like boss battles really lean into this dilemma, especially on hard mode where magic is much more limited and items are outright forbidden. Not unlocked until you've beaten the game once (and balanced for new game plus), it's a great extra challenge that really shows how tactical the fighting system can be.

This might be the best combat system *Final Fantasy* has ever had. It takes the real-time approach of *Final Fantasy XV*, and mixes it with more strategic, classic-feeling elements. Fights are fast, but you have time to breathe if you need it. It's sort of like if *Kingdom Hearts III* didn't make me want to scream every ten seconds.

Abilities can be expanded by finding new weapons and maxing out proficiency with them, allowing that weapon's unique ability to be applied to all of your armoury. Spend enough time with your iron blade, for

instance, and its Triple Slash attack can be used with any weapon. Characters improve by improving their gear, every level-up giving an equal number of skill points to all your weapons. It's a great way of bucking RPG equipment power creep, as rather than weapons being usurped by powerful variants, they stay relevant with different uses.

Finding spells more useful than melee? Equip one that buffs your magic attack.

Materia are where you can get really creative. These shiny orbs slot into your weapons, applying a variety of effects:

elemental magic, parries, stat buffs, abilities and powerful creature summons. As materia gain experience, they unlock permanent upgrades that apply even if you move them from one character to another (the classic 'fire' spell becoming the higher-damage 'fira', for example). Some materia even play together, granting your basic attacks an elemental effect when attached to a link slot next to elemental magic, or the same with resistances.

You can really play with some interesting builds to get the most out of your team, such as by combining Barrier magic with Steadfast Block to soak up massive damage and immediately turn it into ATB so you can spit attacks back out. You'll always have way more materia than your party can use, letting you be creative in how you respond to threats. And thanks to generous

checkpointing allowing you to re-spec before retrying fights, you have space to experiment.

UNSETTLING SCENERY

The mercenary Cloud is constantly asking where his money is. I find myself asking where the PC-specific options are. *Final Fantasy XV: Windows Edition* was a surprisingly detailed port, filled with options to tweak not possible on its original console hardware. Here, you only have the option to choose between high and low shadows and texture quality, which barely seems to do anything, and there's an fps cap that maxes out at 120. Stuttering has been reported on multiple hardware configs, and dynamic resolution scaling can't be disabled.

You'll struggle on mouse and keyboard, unless you get used to a default control system that sometimes expects you to juggle WASD, IJKL, arrow keys, and a mouse all at once. You can't select menu options with the mouse, though you can scroll with the mouse wheel (fun for selecting attacks, but hardly worth it for the hassle of not using a controller). Moving the map with WASD is clunky, and sections with bespoke controls like a motorbike sequence and darts minigame are significantly harder with a keyboard than a controller. Some keyboard prompts feature PlayStation button graphics. Press Esc all you want, the shortcut to bring up the menu is M. The map? That's N, of course.

Still, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* feels great with a controller in hand. It ping-pongs between the combat and exploring a fantasy world that's a well-constructed delight to inhabit. The story remains gripping, and while newcomers get a rich world to delve into for the first time, veterans won't be able to resist seeing what's changed. The extra dimensions to the narrative and visual design leave me – for the first time in a long time – excited about the future of mainline *Final Fantasy*, and the action game fan in me keeps me coming back for the combat – something that I rarely feel in any RPG. ■

PARTY INVITES

These four friends are looking to scrap...

CLOUD STRIFE

Half hair-gel, half lean muscle, he hits things with a big sword until they fall down.



BARRET WALLACE

Hates Shinra the most, and has a gun-arm ready to prove it with long-range firepower.



TIFA LOCKHART

Using her fists, she can multiple tiers of martial arts combos to beatdown enemies.



AERITH GAINSBOROUGH

The magical MVP, she can attack by blasting from afar, or protect with sigils.



PC GAMER VERDICT

A terrific return to form for singleplayer *Final Fantasy* that makes the series' future exciting, in a barebones PC package.

88

HANG TIGHT

Devoid of clear creative direction, **SCARF** starts unravelling

By Malindy Hetfeld

Many developers are influenced by other games, but no one's made their homage quite as obvious as Uprising Studios did here – one look at Scarf's titular piece of wool, and it's impossible not to be reminded of *Journey*. While *Scarf* goes for a similar mood, it's absolutely its own thing, for better and worse. More than just some magical thread, this garment is a sentient being, and the key to the game's puzzle-platforming.

Scarf starts with your unnamed character coming into being, a little blue person with a funky haircut, anime eyes, no mouth, and a black hole right in the middle of its chest. The scarf comes to them in the (very rough) shape of a Chinese dragon, calling them a hero, saying that they, as a being of light, have been chosen to fix the scarf's mother. None of this introduction makes sense, and yet it will be the last time *Scarf* will attempt any sort of explanation. Instead it opts to guide you non-verbally, bar sudden and jarring instances of narration. What you end up doing, for lack of any clear direction, is explore different worlds connected by a central hub. In each of these worlds, you first reach and

subsequently collect lights until you've reached the end of a level and get transported back to the hub, where the light is used to unlock a large, ominous-looking gate.

Scarf is a simple platformer about getting from A to B – you simply follow the available path and collect some light. The scarf acts as a sort of Swiss army knife of platforming tools. At random points in a level collecting a particularly large light will grant you a new ability, transforming the scarf into a pair of wings enabling a double jump or a glider to get over large chasms. You will also sometimes move objects, jump across moving platforms, and press buttons – *Scarf* contains variations of most archetypal platforming game actions.

You simply follow the available path and collect some light

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D puzzle platformer prominently featuring a scarf

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.50

DEVELOPER
Uprising Studios

PUBLISHER
HandyGames

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5800, RTX 3050, 16 GB

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
uprising-studios.com

A large variety of actions and tools often helps keep a platformer varied and interesting, but *Scarf* feels like a random amalgamation of elements in their most basic form. It is a game completely devoid of challenge, calling itself relaxing when it's really just dull. At any point, it's excruciatingly obvious what to do, simply for lack of any discernible alternative – if there is a platform to move, you drag it in the only direction it will go. If there is a lever that can't be operated, you jump the three platforms to the other side of the dungeon that will lead to it. You collect forms of light that do whatever *Scarf* wants them to do at the time – build bridges out of nowhere, open doors, or rejuvenate your dragon scarf after an attack. There is no sense to what will happen next or why, making *Scarf* a disjointed set of ideas, a world that isn't so much interactive but laying everything out for you and then waiting for your input.

LOOSE THREADS

The game's visual presentation meanwhile is often beautiful, with long, sweeping travelling shots



TOP: You can usually see everything an environment offers without exploring.

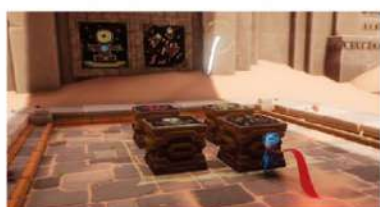


Puzzles often just need you to slot something in an opening.

The environments are very pretty, but quite simplistic in their design.



ABOVE: The light is a nebulous currency; it can fulfil several purposes.



introducing each new bit of scenery. Unfortunately, too many moving elements tend to tank the framerate, closer inspection leaves textures looking quite muddy, and the hero is prone to clipping into surfaces at certain camera angles.

Scarf's marvellous soundtrack deserves a mention, as it's the one element successful at creating a relaxing atmosphere. Story-wise, it will take the attentive observer roughly five minutes to figure out that *Scarf* isn't meant to be a calm safe haven – that's when your scarf transforms into a giant claw to suck out another small person's essence. *Scarf* is as unsubtle with these narrative hints as it is with its puzzle solutions, and while the sprinkled bits of dialogue try to keep things vague, Uprising Studio didn't trust its players to go without them, either, once again depriving you of the agency and joy to work anything out by yourself. And the ending, which can be extended by gathering collectibles, manages to make your efforts across *Scarf's* runtime feel entirely moot. The game lacks a core identity, and what's there is too underbaked to be recommendable. ■

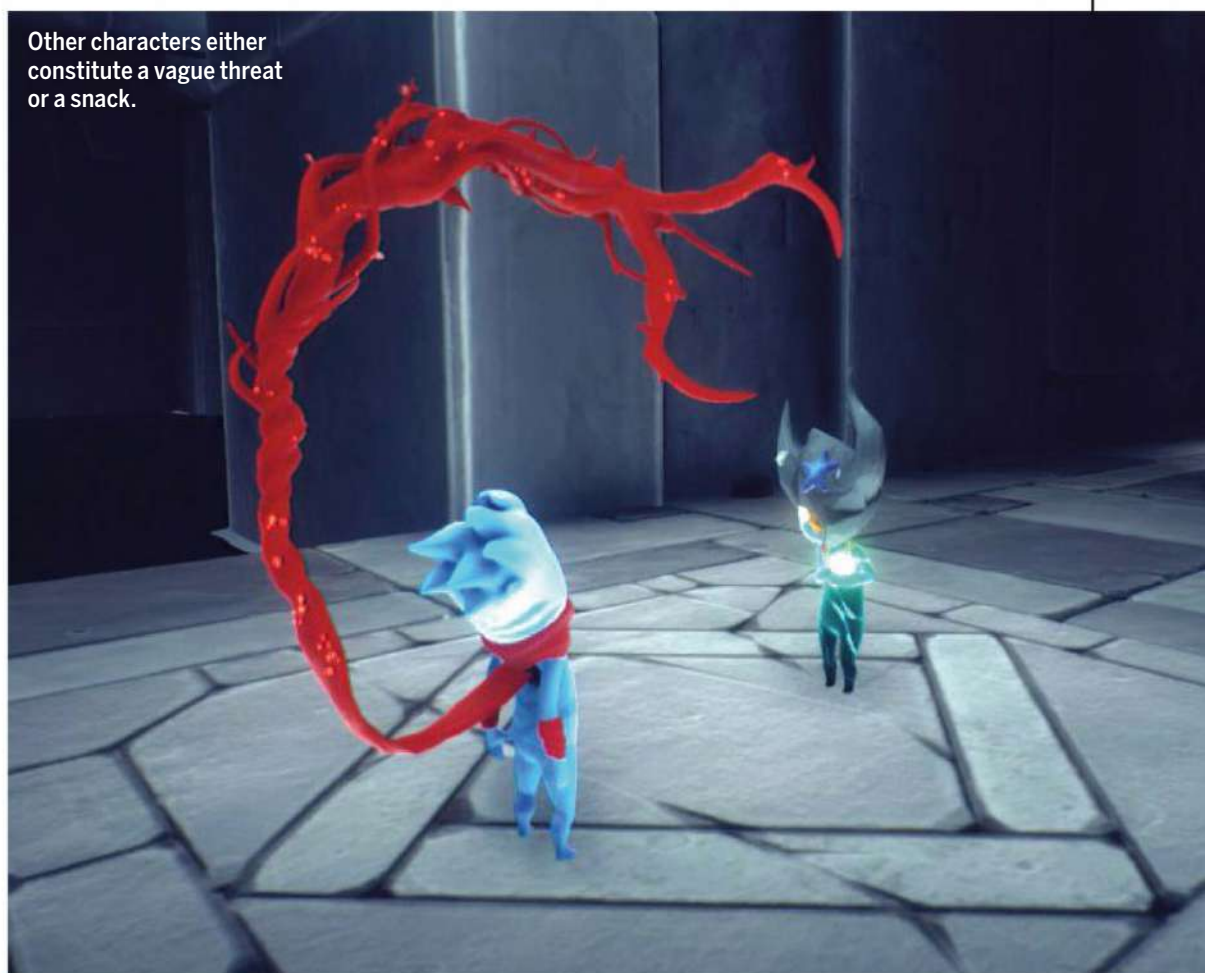


PC GAMER VERDICT

Scarf is a nice if not particularly original idea and it's disappointingly executed on almost all its fronts.

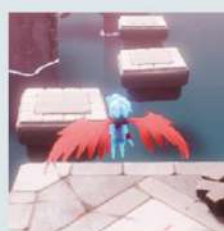
48

Other characters either constitute a vague threat or a snack.

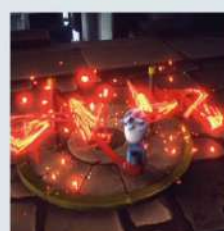


FASHION SHOW

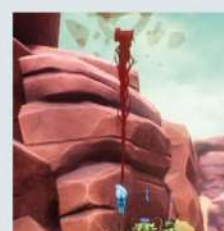
Four ways to use your scarf



1 Despite what you might expect, the wings don't make you fly, but they do give you a double jump – in sections without, it's hard to get around.



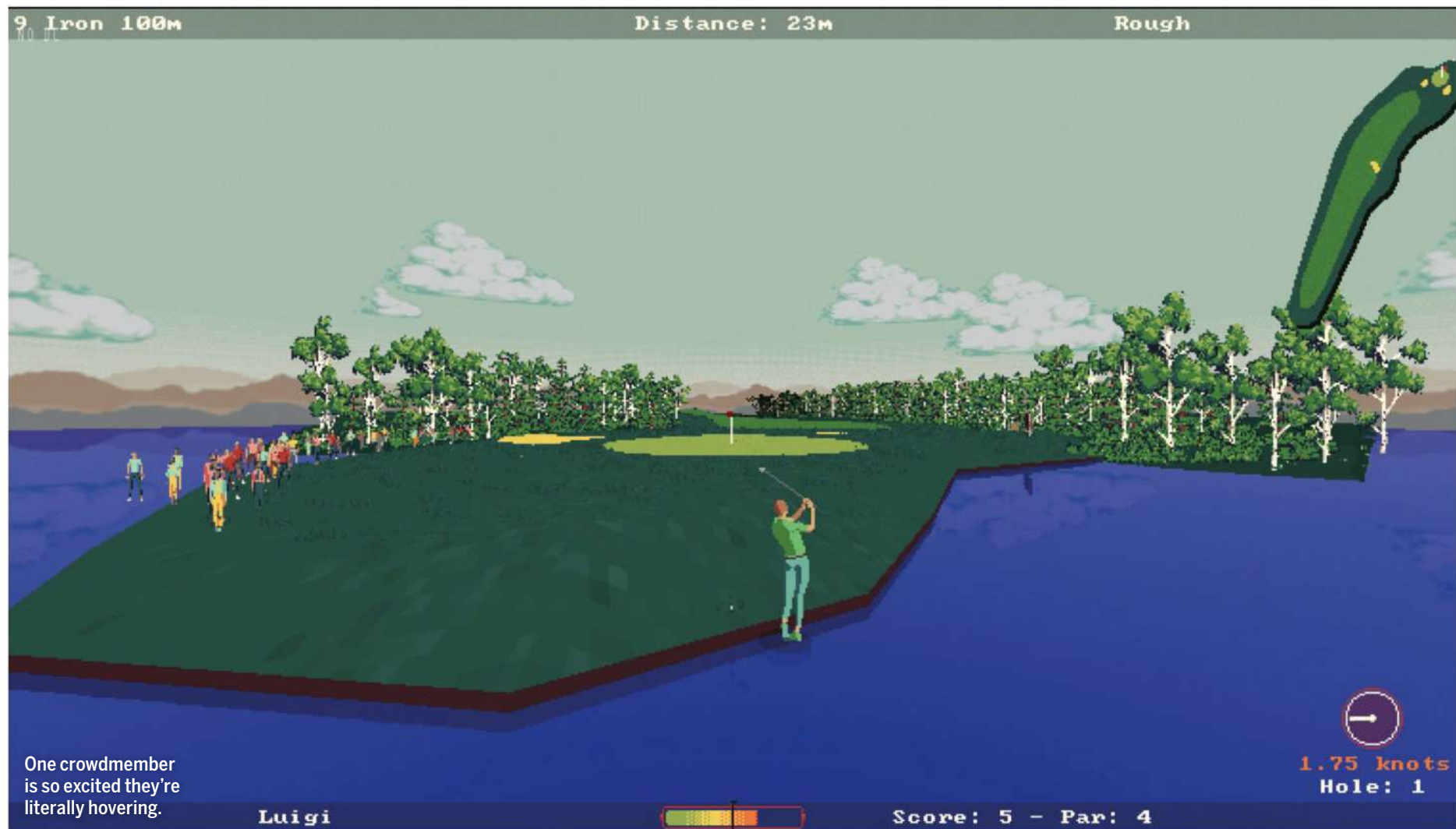
2 At specific points you can use the scarf like a rubber band to shoot you across large gaps. It's automatic, so there's no way to mess up.



3 If you find a ring over a platform, it's time to turn your scarf into a swinging rope. Sometimes you use the double jump, the kite, and the rope in succession.



4 The kite is another way to move across chasms or float on streams of air, but it only works at a certain height, and you also gradually drift down.



FAIR WAY?

Taking the retro-styled **VGA GOLF** for a test drive

I've been searching, half-heartedly, for the perfect golf game for years. Somewhere between a detailed simulation, and the breezy simplicity of crazy golf. *VGA Golf* comes pretty close, while also tapping into my old-man nostalgia for the days of low-poly 3D and poorly digitised sound clips.

Forgoing the trendy analogue swinging of the recent *PGA Tours*, or *The Golf Club* series, *VGA Golf* uses a more traditional on-screen swing-o-meter, which achieves much the same result, but with a single button. You line up the direction of your shot (while accounting for the wind); you tap the button to start your swing, then stop it on the swing-o-meter to decide its power. There are a couple of extra steps to decide the angle, and type of club you'll use, but playing the game is simplicity itself, despite a dated aesthetic that perhaps suggests an old-fashioned fustiness.

That aesthetic caught my attention, and thankfully it's been implemented with a considerate eye. *VGA Golf* takes after a '90s golf game, while allowing modern controllers, online multiplayer, and HD

resolutions. Perhaps I've forgotten the harsh reality of early 3D, but it really does resemble an Amiga sports game, just with a smoother framerate.

FORE STARS

There isn't a *whole* lot of content here. You can only trammel one course comprised of, naturally, 18 holes, although you can trim that down to nine for a shorter game. Playing a game online is a process of port-forwarding and firewall management so likely you'll be playing this

offline, either against yourself or some actual local chums. Yep, there's no AI, something that personally doesn't bother me much.

VGA Golf walks a fine line between simulation and silliness, in a way that I find appealing. Here you can swap golf balls for miniature

Playing the game is simplicity itself, despite a dated aesthetic

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An old-fashioned golf game, but with modern bells and whistles

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Trederia Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
1-4

LINK
bit.ly/VGAGolf

snowmen, flower pots and planets. I had fun creating characters vaguely based on those part-time putters Mario and Luigi.

But the best thing about *VGA Golf* – and I think it's an important element of the golf game – is the atmosphere of the course, the quiet ambience as you plan and execute each swing. The calming background audio (of passing planes and chirping birdsong) is perfectly placed, as are the sudden, compressed sound clips of the very '90s announcer, who chips in when you punt the ball into the weeds. "In with the snakes and crocodiles!"

VGA Golf is simple, but not *too* simple, and detailed, without being offputtingly so. If you can get onboard with the presentation – hopefully, you're enthusiastic about it – this is a worthwhile entry in the genre: a good walk enhanced by a blast of '90s nostalgia. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A basic yet full-fat golf game that offers a focussed game of golf, uncluttered with alternate modes.

80

BELOW: Guide a ball to the target to open the exit.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Ben James

LINK
benjames171.itch.io

BALL CONTROL

Solving puzzles by shifting balls in **PATHFINDER**

Pathfinder's central mechanic is one I've not seen too often: it's a puzzler in which you guide glowing balls of light around, to activate switches. As a little green person, you have to leap around, push crates and fiddle about with mirrors, all to get the balls to go where you want them to.

The order is the most important thing. It had me restarting each stage a number of times. You need to shift that crate to the teleporter, but *before* you activate that ball, so the crate doesn't block its programmed path. Oh, but the ball was going to *power* the teleporter – hmm, now I need to rethink this whole level.

Stages are manageable enough that I was able to sustain the puzzle in my head, chewing it over while my hands mechanically tested my theories. It's a Goldilocks puzzler for

someone who likes puzzle games, but whose brain nopes out at the more extreme entries in the genre. (If you hadn't guessed, I'm very much among your number.)

Sure, there have been teleporters in puzzle games, and mirrors and a whole lot of crates before, but this configuration feels fresh, with each of the elements meshing together like clockwork. With its small scope – not to mention its wonderfully warbly chiptune soundtrack – *Pathfinder* feels like it should come packed on a floppy disk with about 100 other forgotten little games.

I'm hopeful it won't receive a similar fate – buried under the rockfall of new game releases – as *Pathfinder* is one of those rare games that makes you think, "Huh, that's neat," and that offers a lunchtime's worth of testing fun. ■

77

JENGA TOYS

Wario has nothing to fear from **JINGOKU**'s microgames

Jenga meets *WarioWare*. I could probably end the review there, but I suppose you're wondering if that unusual mash-up is any cop?

It certainly earns points for style. Where *WarioWare* is characterised by its anarchic pixel art and gleefully childish sense of humour, *Jingoku* is more understated, minimalist, and dare I say classier, its assortment of timed microgames including plenty of silly scenarios – but no nose-picking. Instead, you're *Flappy Bird*-ing a paper aeroplane, you're playing tug-of-war, and hurling a pesky hat onto a hat rack.

But while Nintendo's classic series offers a mixture of tough and easy games, I was only ever able to scrape together a few successes in *Jingoku*. It might be that the time limit is stricter, or it might have something to

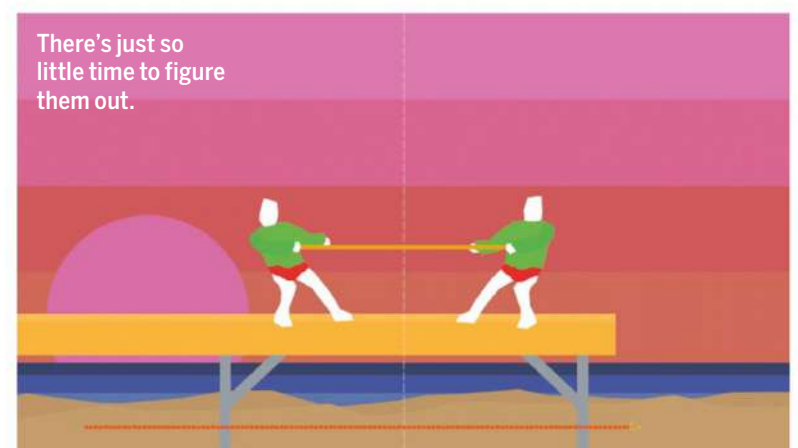
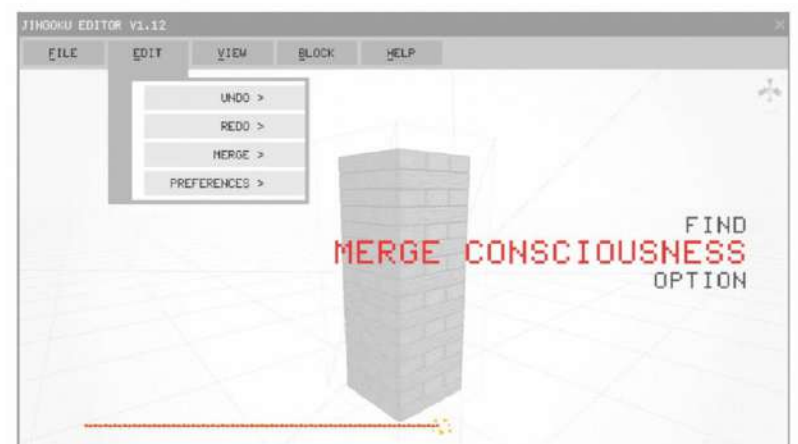
do with this game's less responsive control systems, which are not explained before you're thrown in at the deep end.

With scant few seconds on the clock, I feel that movement should be instantaneous, or at least consistent across the microgames, but I failed so many scenarios here because I was still getting used to the controls. There's very often a slight delay between your input and the character's actions, and no time to get a feel for how long that is.

You may get used to it, and there's certainly innovation outside the microgames – you pick each game by plucking a block from an increasingly wobbly Jenga tower. When the tower tumbles, it's time to tot up your high score. Or – in my case – it was time to close the browser tab, a little frustrated by *Jingoku*. ■

55

BELOW: Some of the games are quite funny.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Dreyan

LINK
dreyan.itch.io/jingoku

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



A bi-weekly TV magazine published by Tokyo News Service. Their articles have unique content and special features targeted at their savvy, loyal reader base.

And what could be more unique than a big cow?

CLAN PARTY

YAKUZA KIWAMI will forever change how you look at manholes

If only I could write this intro like a *Yakuza* game. Pattering rain and neon signs reflected in puddles. Pulsating soapland ambience. And, eventually, familiar text and echoing drums to remind you what you're reading: *Bhum-bhum*. Feature intro: 70 words? Unfortunately, for it to work, it would have to be 40 minutes long and be followed by a 10-year spell in prison for being too metatextual.

Even having played it all before, the early parts of *Kiwami* require serious mental investment. There are clans, friendships, romances, rivalries. All of the families have different levels of responsibility. Not all patriarchs are created equal. But this is perhaps what makes the series so compelling. It constructs the sort of tiered, interlocking crime drama that Takeshi Kitano would be pleased with. And then, almost out of nowhere, it gets weirder and weirder. Yet, somehow, it works.

It helps that the story is so dense it can't help but be nourishing. There's little space for subtlety here: the themes are betrayal, love, loyalty, fatherhood. A bright picture painted in primary colours. It's a tale that can be distilled to a single paragraph on

Wikipedia, but it still feels like a journey – perhaps because the hundreds of hours of *Yakuza* that precede and follow are built upon this one big betrayal. It's overblown to give it additional weight because this is where it all started – this is, after all, primarily a game about clotheslining strangers – but *Yakuza Kiwami* still feels brutally formative, like your first disappointing Christmas.

The changes to the original story help keep things engaging

GIF IT A CHANCE

The changes to the original story help keep things engaging. Kiryu's former best friend Nishikiyama, for instance, is given more motivation to eventually turn into the oiled asshat he is. It's not enough to completely forgive him, but it certainly humanises him. The Majima

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The only series to successfully combine organised crime and crane games

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Sega

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3nDawPk

Everywhere stuff is perhaps less welcome. The intro gives us a thin reason for Kiryu and Majima to kick the omurice out of each other. It turns *Kiwami* into a hugely giffable game, but it can fray the nerves when you're just trying to progress without endless, longform battles. I like it, but then I play *Yakuza* as much for the chance to drop people backside-first onto bollards as I do the story. If you don't want to stop to suplex people every five minutes, then you're playing the wrong crime game.

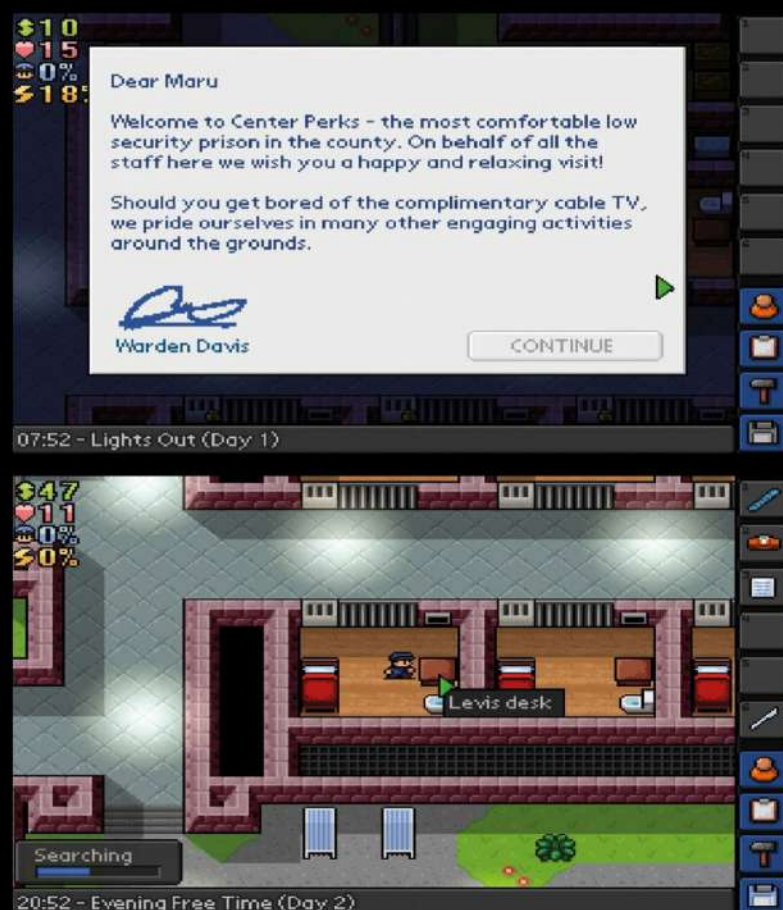
Perhaps 'crime game' is a misnomer. It might be the theme of this month, but Kiryu spends most of his time trying to extricate himself from the Tojo Clan. But unfortunately for him he's as bad at that as he is at choosing shirts. Having said that, if Sega can make me care this much about pocket circuit, imagine what it could do with a spin-off about raising orphans in an Okinawan safehouse. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

I rip off my top to reveal intricate tattoo of an above average score as well as some dragons and, oh let's see, a tiger.

78

BELOW: Every E3 hotel is literally worse than this.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£21

DEVELOPER
Mouldy Toof Studios

PUBLISHER
Team17

SCRIM PICKINGS

THE ESCAPISTS proves I'm the worst person of all

Here's a game that shows me endless reasons I wouldn't survive prison. If the repetition didn't kill me, the other inmates definitely would. It's probably something to do with selling them back their own stolen blankets. Or robbing them while they're unconscious. Or flushing all their contraband down the bog, just for a laugh.

The more I think about it, the more *The Escapists* reminds me of a British boarding school with nightsticks and better internet. Perhaps because of this, it requires a level of patience I'm not sure I have. My first job is laundry duty, and the temptation to pop on a guard uniform and sashay to freedom is overwhelming. But nothing in *The Escapists* is simple. I can reach the exterior fence easily enough, but chopping through the

fence requires luck, planning, duct tape, and more files than I ever seem to be able to find. And worse, even when I do manage to steal enough of those components I still end up sent to solitary because I forget to put a dummy in my bed to fool the guards.

There's a bit too much repetition and failure for it to feel wholly rewarding, but the intricate, immersive construction of it all is impressive. You can start a tunnel with a handful of plastic spoons, certainly: but finishing it requires wooden supports, blankets to hide your work, a light source, and a place to dump the soil you dig up. The rigidity of it all just makes it more exciting when you break the rules or finally manage to escape, but there's a discouraging amount of failure before you come close to having your Shawshank moment. ■

70



MARVELLOUS MISS TAKE

Sophia, the protagonist of *Marvellous Miss Take*, isn't like the other, bad criminals on this spread. Nope. She's only stealing priceless artefacts back from the cultural elite so everyone can enjoy them. Like the Robin Hood of looking at shit and pondering. But even with that wholesome thought in mind, her exploits are only partially satisfying. The game looks fabulous, but over-familiar levels sap your desire to reclaim Sophia's collection, however noble her cause. It gets more interesting when the varied skills of her associates are brought into the mix, but the gameplay loop doesn't match the design. There's an art analogy in here I'm not cultured enough to make. ■

66



MONACO: WHAT'S YOURS IS MINE

This is one of those games to which screenshots cannot possibly do justice. When static, it looks like someone's scattered Jolly Ranchers on a blueprint. But there's an intuitive, almost unconscious ease to *Monaco* that makes it irresistible. It's even fun when things go wrong and your meticulously-executed heist turns into slapstick. It's fun when experienced alone, but there's something magnificent about sharing your failures and triumphs with real people – even if it does make a successful mission harder: partly because other people are unpredictable, and partly through the fear of being the one who bollocks it up. ■

89



STYX: MASTER OF SHADOWS

Never thought I'd say it, but it's lovely to play as a goblin. Too much time wasted in the Warhammer fantasy world means I go in expecting to be a jittering, capering villain, only interested in sticking people with sharp things. But *Master of Shadows* is more cerebral than that. In the first five minutes alone there are fragile alliances, political grievances, and ancient magics. But however it's framed, there's still a specific thrill in being a little green monster who silently kills people. ■

74

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STEAM



PS5



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HARDWARE



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GROUP TEST

Revitalise your gaming set-up with one of these top projectors.



100

TECH REPORT

Exploring the consequences of Nvidia's Arm merger.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build your perfect PC with our guide to parts and prices.

GROUP TEST

GAMING PROJECTORS

Beamers that will bolster, rather than belittle, your gaming experience.

By Katie Wickens

Using a projector for gaming might sound like a joke, but you'd be surprised how far beamers have come over the years. Sure, the contrast is unlikely to beat the deep blacks of an OLED TV, but the stuff that really matters for gaming – latency, portability and definition – have all seen major improvements.

The projectors of old couldn't hold a candle to the gaming abilities of these modern illuminators, and it seems it's no longer laughable to consider buying a projector instead of a TV for gaming. Besides, gaming isn't the only thing these beamers bring to the table. There are plenty of other benefits to swapping your TV for a projector. Not only will you save space, you'll be able to shift and store your home entertainment system much more easily. It's also a smaller target for controller-hurling kids.



X1300I

BENQ £1,249

The best long-throw projector

1 The BenQ X1300I comes in at the top thanks, in no small part, to its impressive 8ms response time. With one of the swiftest refresh rates on the list, at 120Hz, this projector has everything it needs to deliver competitive big-screen gaming, without fear of it compromising your rank. It may not be as fast as the BenQ TK700STi, but there's more to gaming than just speed.

The built-in speakers are surprisingly punchy, and the 30,000 hour lamp life means it'll last a while longer than the speedier BenQ model, provided you don't block the exhausts. In

fact, as long as you can mount it on the ceiling – which is where it's best situated – that shouldn't be an issue. Just make sure you have the space for a long-throw projector before you commit to buying.

Either way, it's backed by exceptional brightness, so the light of day shouldn't hamper your gaming experience. And coming in with the kind of speeds you'd expect from a tidy gaming monitor, this beamer will see you right.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- 120Hz refresh can match a high fps
- Bright with good lamp life
- Best mounted on the ceiling

SPECS RESOLUTION: 1080P / LATENCY: 8 MS / REFRESH: 120HZ / WEIGHT: 14.1 LBS (6.4 KG)

TK700STi

BENQ £1,199

The fastest beamer of them all

2 The BenQ TK700STi gaming projector shows off with its exemplary 8ms response times when playing in 1080p at 120Hz, and a rather exceptional 4ms at 240Hz. Even in 4K at 60Hz you're looking at a 16ms response time.

This isn't a native 4K projector, however. It uses Texas Instrument's XPR (expanded pixel resolution) pixel-switching tech, and does so rather well. Being a short throw projector also means there's less faff when looking for a place to put it. No need to hang overhead, or tuck it behind the sofa, but if you can manage a distance of 6.5

foot (2m) you get just over 100 inches (2.5 m) of screen space. Coupled with the 3,000 ANSI lumen brightness, the BenQ TK700STi should give up a great cinematic experience even in broad daylight.

While the lamp life – rated at only 15,000 hours on the most eco-friendly setting – leaves something to be desired and external speakers are necessary to get a well rounded sound, there's a lot of power behind this little projector's beams.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Incredible 4ms latency at 1080p
- Impressive 4K upscaling capability
- Below average lamp life

SPECS RESOLUTION: 1080P / 4K UPSCALED / LATENCY: 4 MS / REFRESH: 240HZ / WEIGHT: 6.8 LBS (3.1 KG)



2



1

THE DIFFERENCE FOR COMPETITIVE GAMING USAGE

Sometimes projectors come into the gaming space claiming to be for 'pro-gaming'. But in order to deliver on their promise, a projector really has to ace two main things.

First off, it should be able to achieve a latency of lower than 60ms. Lower is better, especially for competitive gaming, as your reactions will count for more. All those listed here manage 40ms or lower, with the top choices even reaching below the 5ms mark.

The other thing is refresh rate. If your machine pumps out high frame rates, your projector should match it. Our picks have refresh rates of 120Hz or over, but for non-competitive gamers 60Hz is fine.

GROUP TEST



THE 16-20MS RESPONSE TIME IS STILL GREAT FOR PLAYING AAA GAMES IN UP TO 4K

3

Chroma

VAVA £2,263

Brash beams in true 4K

3 At the high end is the true 4K Vava Chroma. Not only has it got great gaming capability, it's also touting rich colours and resounding Harman Kardon speakers. The only real drawback is the price, though the Indiegogo price is 38% cheaper than its \$4,699 RRP.

At 24.3 pounds (10kg) it's pretty hefty, but there's power behind the bulk. Thanks to the ultra-short-throw nature of the Vava Chroma it'll sit happily against the wall on your TV stand, too. You can mount it to the ceiling if you like, and there are even options to rotate the display as needed. Also, eight

keystone points makes it very versatile. This one caps out at a 60Hz refresh rate, so although it's not the best for competitive gaming, the 16-20ms response time is still great for playing AAA games in up to 4K. That is if your GPU can handle it.

Of course, the wealth of premium features here comes at a premium price, but that's backed by a two-year warranty and 25,000 hours of lamp life. That's around 11 hours a day, every day, for six years.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Ultra-short throw
- True 4K resolution
- A real bank-breaker

SPECS RESOLUTION: UP TO 4K / LATENCY: 16 MS / REFRESH: 60HZ / WEIGHT: 24.3 LBS (10 KG)

Elfin

XGIMI £559

Little yet lofty beams for less

4 The Xgimi Elfin is one of the smallest projectors on the list, making it super portable. And while there's no battery for untethered gaming, it's still easy enough to slip into a bag and take to a friend's house for a group gaming session. And the Elfin is no slouch in gaming mode, with a more than acceptable 26.5ms response time, although the 60Hz refresh does add a cap to how many fps you can appreciate. It's perhaps one for non-competitive online gaming, or a good old couch co-op session.

Adding to the portability of the Elfin, it features the

incredible ability not only to automatically focus and correct the keystone position, but also to avoid obstacles on the projected surface such as photo frames or light switches – it makes the setup super speedy and straightforward for a quick movie or TV show.

Though there's no Netflix compatibility, and the sound system isn't the greatest, it's backed by a 30,000 hour lamp life – that's 10 hours a day, every day, for eight years.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Fantastic auto obstacle avoidance
- Gorgeous, compact design
- Noticeable dithering in dark areas

SPECS RESOLUTION: 1080P / LATENCY: 26.5 MS / REFRESH: 60HZ / WEIGHT: 2 LBS (900 G)

BLOCKBUSTER *Three games that are ripe for the big-screen experience*



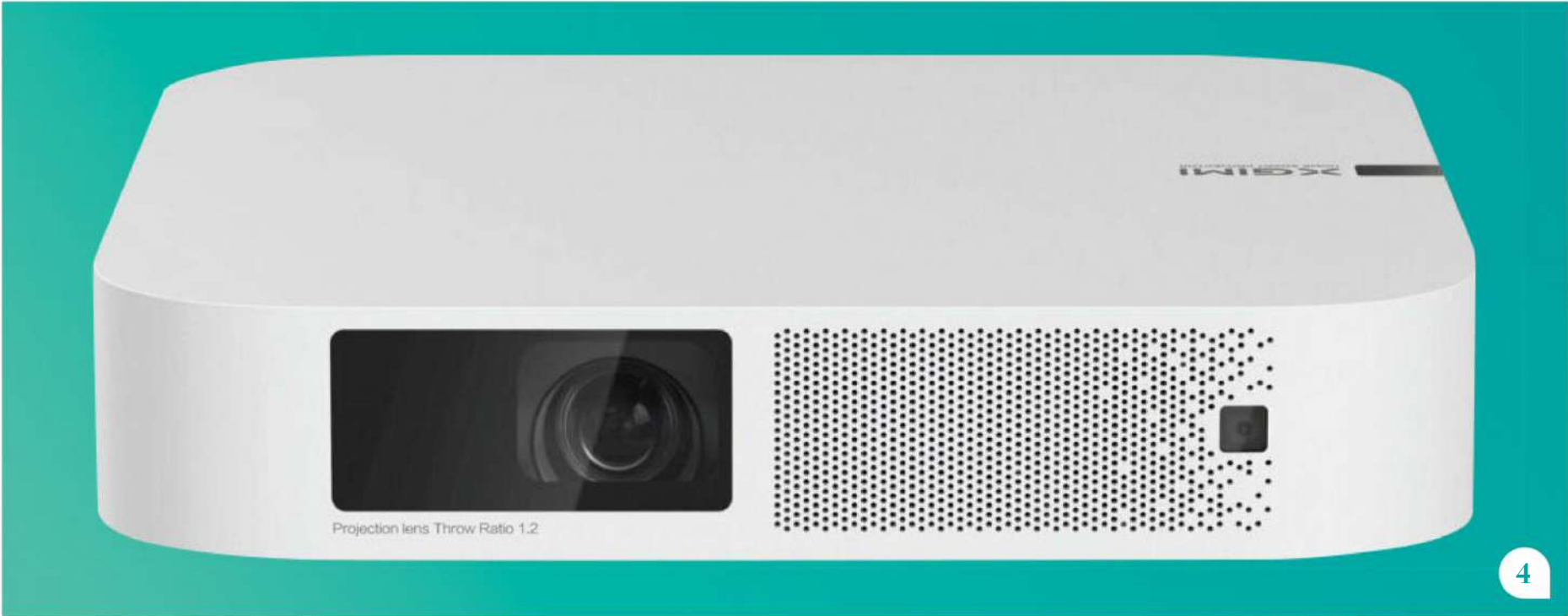
RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2
Nothing beats living your own Western tale, hacking it through the vistas, and stopping to make a horse silhouette.



NO MAN'S SKY
Projecting *No Man's Sky* onto a large screen manages to further inflate the infinite expanse of space ahead.



DAYS GONE
Filling a wall with the Oregon hills is a satisfying experience, especially while ramming into Freakers on your bike.



Halo

XGIMI £699

One to make the picos cry

5 For a little more money than its sister, the Xgimi Elfin, the Xgimi Halo adds oodles more portability to the list of great features. It comes with a solid battery life that'll keep you going for a good three hours in standard mode, and it can even be used as a portable Bluetooth speaker. Oddly the Halo's shape is the only one we've seen that lends itself to ceiling-based projection (for gaming in bed). It does block the exhausts a little when you lie it down, but it's a cool option to have.

When it comes to gaming mode, you're looking at a higher latency than most on this list,

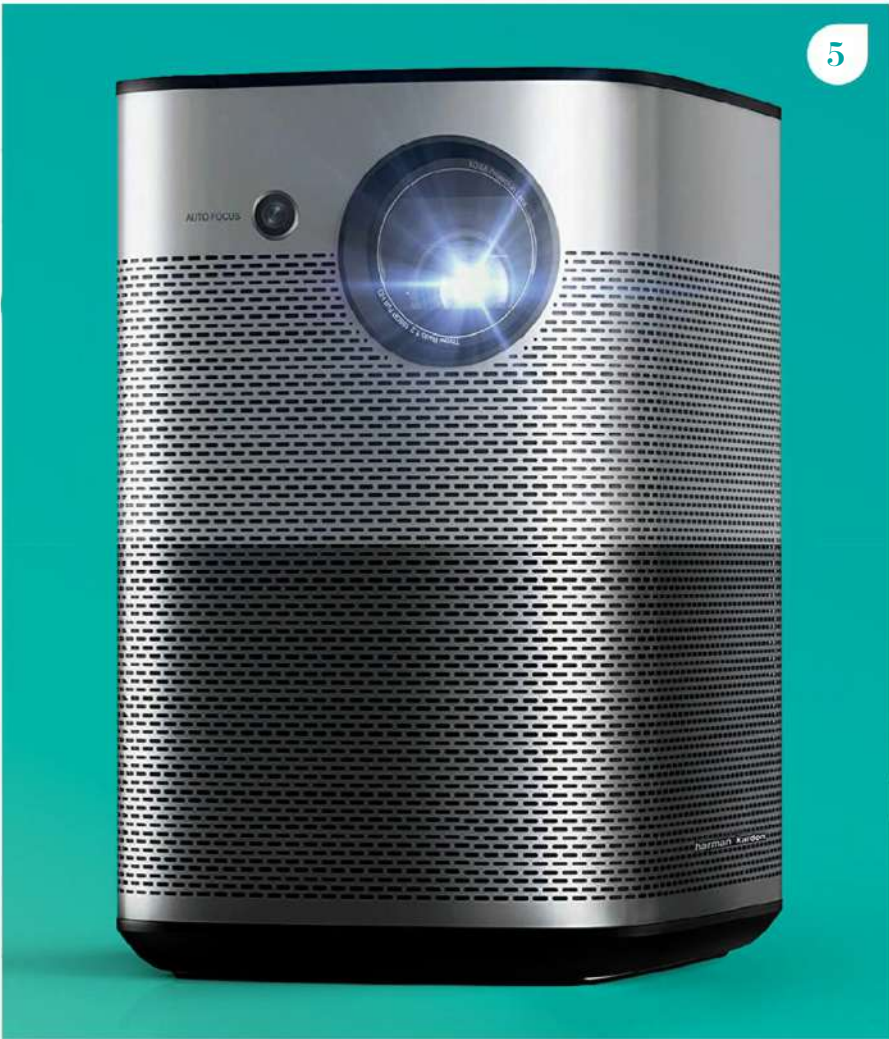
but response time isn't everything. As long as you have it in gaming mode, it isn't excessively noticeable, but we wouldn't recommend it for fast paced, online gaming.

It's another smart Android device that boots up fast, and doesn't need to be yards from the wall in order to get a good-size screen going. It's worth noting it has to be square-on for gaming mode, as the keystone correction feature won't work in this mode.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Supremely portable
- Excellent lamp life
- Not the best response time

SPECS RESOLUTION: 1080P / LATENCY: 40 MS / REFRESH: 60HZ / WEIGHT: 3.5 LBS (1.6 KG)





The fabled RTX 3090. Maybe one day, somewhere, a shop will have one in stock.

ARM DEALERS

What does Nvidia's proposed **ARM** merger mean for gamers?

From a PC gamer's standpoint, Arm's widespread usage outside our bubble is humbling. The UK-based microprocessor design company's chips have been used in all Apple smartphones since 2008. They've effectively powered the total cultural and societal change we've experienced over the last decade. They also power most other smartphones and mobile devices, and there are around 180 billion chips out there to date. Even the PlayStation 4 snuck one into its architecture as a secondary processor, hidden away so discreetly it wasn't discovered until 2020. It's a bit like stepping into a McDonalds in Tokyo, seeing that the menu's totally different, and realising the world's much bigger than your Intel x86, Big Mac brain had previously conceived.

In September 2020 Nvidia placed a \$40bn (£31m) bid for Arm. Governments on both sides of the pond bristled and readied their lawyers in response. In the UK, a six-month inquiry was launched in order to examine the deal and assess its potential to damage competition in chip-making. Days after that, the United States Federal Trade Commission lodged its own objection and launched a similar investigation. With many Arm customers being companies based in China, there was concern that the company may be being used as a foot soldier

in a trade war. Now, in 2022, those investigations are still ongoing and the merger has yet to be completed.

HANDS DOWN

Nvidia didn't see what all the fuss was about. In an official statement, it argued customers would get the same products with added frills from Team Green, "As part of Nvidia, Arm will continue to operate its open-licensing model, while maintaining the global customer neutrality that has been foundational to its success, with 180 billion chips shipped to-date by its licensees. Arm partners will also benefit from both companies' offerings, including Nvidia's innovations."

Which is all terribly interesting if you've been seduced by the 4,000 Trading212 ads you got served on YouTube in the last year and have become a tech industry investor. But what about those of us who just care about running PC games as quickly and as beautifully as they'll go?

If one were optimistic enough to take Nvidia at its word, low-power CPUs with added tech innovations from the GPU giant doesn't sound like a terrible thing for the budget end of the desktop CPU/APU market. The company's been getting very interested in machine learning lately, training its NGX supercomputer to infer the differences between low-res and super-high-res 64K images and then using Tensor cores on its GPUs to make use of all that info in real-time and apply the DLSS technique to your games, running them at something



Arm before Apple

Arm microprocessor designs have been around since 1985, appearing in the BBC Micro and early Acorn business computers. Between '85 and '87 the Arm 2 had moved from 8MHz of processing power to an enormous 12MHz. It's powered the Commodore Amiga and the Macintosh SE, long before it dominated the smartphone space.



FAR LEFT: Experiments with deep learning have yielded some performance gains on RTX cards.

LEFT: Nvidia's GPUs are already market-dominant. Would Arm tip it over into monopoly?

MERGE PRICING *How Nvidia got in a position to buy Arm*



WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS
Crypto mining demand has driven Nvidia's value up from \$50bn in 2016 to \$300bn in 2022.



ARM AND A LEG
During that same period, Arm's company value grew at a comparatively much smaller rate – \$2bn per year.



CRASH OVERRIDE
Japanese holdings company Softbank sold its stake in Nvidia during the 2018 crypto crash.



GROWING PAINS
Softbank also cuts ties with Arm just five years after its \$32bn acquisition following poor growth.

visually similar to supersampled resolutions while taking the strain off your local resources. What might those experiments into learning AI yield on a desktop APU?

And we're not jumping the gun to assume a more committed move into desktop processors. Apple announced in 2021 that its desktop and laptop devices would be migrating to Arm chips after using Intel x86 since 2006. Therefore, Nvidia's ownership of Arm would bring more desktop business. Not a massive seismic shift, but a definite move in that direction.

Mini PCs also feel like a natural avenue for exploration for an Nvidia brandishing newly owned Arm chips. The current generation of Arm has minuscule thermal venting requirements compared to the Intel and AMD CPUs we routinely pop in and hook up to liquid coolers or towering air fans, and given Apple's propensity for sleek, slim chassis that'll likely be a requirement for the chips that live inside their desktops and laptops too.

Otherwise, on the surface at least, the merger doesn't appear to have the potential to shake up the way we think about desktop gaming CPUs. Not anything like as much as AMD's Ryzen, for example. Instead, perhaps the most pertinent question to hardware enthusiasts who care about getting maximum performance for a fair price is this: are governments right to be concerned about it? And by extension, should we be worried too?

NOT EASY BEING GREEN

On paper, Nvidia's buyout means that it would hold the licenses to some existing system-on-a-chip (SoC) platforms

like its Tegra devices, the Nintendo Switch, and its self-driving car tech, rather than operating under license to use Arm's architectural design IP. That doesn't seem like \$40bn worth of advantage, though.

More likely, the motivation for Jen-Hsun Huang's company is market independence. It would be able to create devices using its own CPU, GPU, and networking tech, without having to play happy families with Intel or AMD as it currently must in order to spec out most of the desktop and laptop devices you'll find an Nvidia graphics card within. And that's the worry.

Because that scenario gives Nvidia a significant advantage over its rivals AMD and Intel, and creates the possibility of a market monopoly. Whenever that happens, the downsides for the consumer are the same: no incentive for quality, innovation, or value. Ride the train anywhere in the United Kingdom and you'll immediately understand. The UK government's investigation is specifically looking into the "ability to foreclose competition" – that is to say, whether this move would put Nvidia in a position to buy and dismantle its long-time frenemies.

Nvidia argues that this assessment underestimates AMD and Intel's power. "No industry observer can seriously contend that Intel, AMD, and Arm's other competitors are so incapable that they cannot even compete with Arm," reads a statement from the company published on the UK government website. Given that Nvidia's in a position to buy Arm in the first place because it manufactures cards that more or less 'mine' money from thin air, that's asking us all to place a lot of trust in corporate business practices.

Phil Iwaniuk

“ARM WILL CONTINUE TO OPERATE ITS OPEN-LICENSING MODEL”

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£792

MOTHERBOARD		B550 Gaming X AM4 Gigabyte £99 This motherboard offers two display outs to support our choice of chip, while also delivering a modest selection of USB ports.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 5600G AMD £265 This is a little pricier than we'd like, but it's one of few viable budget options that avoids a discrete graphics card for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,440

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B560M-Plus WiFi Asus £120 We didn't want to go too cheap on the motherboard, as plenty of USB ports and WiFi go a long way.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 11400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Freezer 34 Esports Arctic £30 This is a great compact cooler, though for a little more you can buy a version with two fans for better performance.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,501

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi MSI £410 This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 12900K Intel £599 Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB Corsair £290 A new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. The Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB is blisteringly quick.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



At least the name 'Ridden' never stops being funny.

“The pacing feels one-note instead of the chaos that Left 4 Dead conjured”

Wishing **BACK 4 BLOOD** would commit to its sillier side

The shadow of the past looms large over *Back 4 Blood*. Hell, just in case it wasn't clear that this was intended to be a *Left 4 Dead* follow-up, the team at Turtle Rock studios even follow the same naming convention by putting a number in the title. Perhaps it's an early sign that this new take on zombie slaughtering was always going to struggle to carve out its own identity.

Still, I find my time gunning down the Ridden leaves me pondering who this game is actually for. Now, I understand I have already said it follows in *Left 4 Dead*'s lineage and could assume it was made for fans of that game. Except *Back 4 Blood* doesn't seem like it understands what made its forebear so engrossing. Few games can match the tense flow that

BEN TYRER



THIS MONTH
Finding best places to hole up during zombie apocalypses

ALSO PLAYED
GTA IV,
Max Payne 3

the Valve original conjured up, with the game's AI director tweaking the level design and pacing to make sure you never felt totally safe. Then there were the special infected, carefully and sporadically used, to be genuine sources of terror.

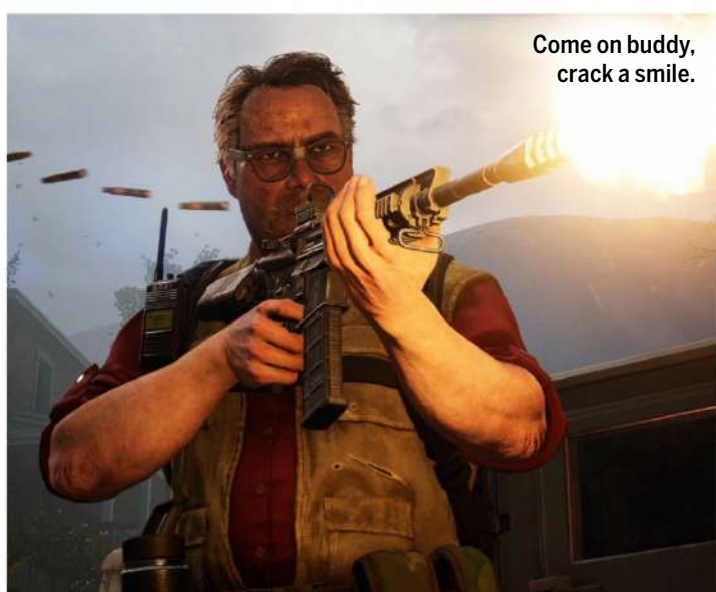
Yet, despite obviously wanting to recreate that sort of atmosphere, Turtle Rock's latest doesn't get the balance right. There's tension, sure, but one generated from sheer attrition. Your gang of zombie bashers regularly has to repel overwhelming waves of hungry

corpses, and rarely will you have a moment to actually let this grimy world get on top of you. This isn't helped by the new special mutations not having a shred of the personality of their predecessors and being constantly thrown into the mix. This makes the game's pacing feel one-note instead of the medley of chaos that *Left 4 Dead* conjured.

HUNGRY 4 MORE

However, there are glimpses of a better version of *Back 4 Blood* as you play. Early on in the game's first act, you're asked to create a diversion by heading to a bar and bringing the

THE GONZO SILLINESS FEELS MORE LIKE BACK 4 BLOOD'S OWN PERSONALITY



noise. All your team needs to do is defend a jukebox that's blaring out songs such as Ace of Spades, the Pulp Fiction theme, and The Hives' Tick Tick Boom while your screen gets filled with Ridden who are trying to tear chunks from you.

Now, this is hardly the stuff nightmares are made of, but the gonzo silliness feels more like *Back 4 Blood*'s own personality, as Motörhead's signature guitar line rings out while you're churning through the horde. That feeling of attrition is actually welcome here, as the game makes a point of leaving this bar stocked up with more than enough ammo so the party never dies. The glorious daftness of having a siege soundtracked via a narratively convenient jukebox is infectious.

While there are plenty of setpieces throughout what I've played so far, none capture my attention in the same way as that bar fight. Maybe that's down to the game not quite capturing any tone – too arch one moment, much too serious the next – and always keeping an eye on the past to give what it thinks fans want, rather than delivering something they crave. Which, for me, is apparently loud music while gunning down the undead. ■



“I’ve never powered up every weapon”

Learning to love the minigames in **FINAL FANTASY X**

▶ SARAH JAMES



THIS MONTH
Won the Blitzball tournament in Luca on the first try.

ALSO PLAYED
Valheim, *The Witcher: Enhanced Edition*

I’ve never been a fan of timed events – the early *Tomb Raider* games saw to that. Trying to get Lara from lever to a closing door, often across a series of obstacles, had me tearing my hair out all those years ago. So why do I suddenly feel the need to get all the achievements for *Final Fantasy X* – some of which involve timed minigames?

I spent the first half of the Christmas break finishing my current playthrough of *Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age*. Boxing Day saw me sitting through Quickening sequences – the short cutscenes that accompany what is essentially a Limit Break attack – as I attempted to nab the final achievement I needed. I had to get every concurrence through Quickening chains, which requires fast reflexes, good timing and, as it turns out, a decent amount of RNG.

I think it was my ultimate success with *Final Fantasy XII* that prompted me to jump straight into *Final Fantasy X*. But, unfortunately, I’m not sure anything is going to prepare me to take on the lightning dodge minigame. That particular challenge

is why I’ve never powered up every Celestial weapon – one of the items needed is rewarded for completing it. I’ve played the game countless times but not once in the last 20 years have I managed to fully unlock Lulu’s ultimate weapon.

LIGHTNING STRIKES

The thing is, I’ve never really given myself much of a chance. I’ve attempted to dodge lightning strikes in the Thunder Plains a few times, but I’ve only ever once made any real effort to do it 200 times, consecutively. On that occasion, I gave up after getting a little over 100 dodges before getting hit.

Dodging the strikes isn’t difficult in itself – just press the key when your screen flashes and you’ll avoid it. There’s even a certain area where the strikes are more predictable, making it much easier. But one lapse in concentration and you have to start over – or hurl your keyboard out the window/quit the game in a huge huff.

This time will be different though. I’m going to embrace the challenge and shake off the frustration that was instilled in me over timed events, all those years ago. Those Celestial weapons will be mine – finally. ■



“Call me a quitter. Call me weak. Call me a soft-willed baby boy”

Crafting a new sense of self despite **HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION**

It's one of our great modern myths, our answer to the titans of old: the great green knight and the naked blue lady who lives in his hat, delivering us from the terror of big ugly guys yelling “wort wort wort”.

In order to spiritually prepare myself for *Halo Infinite*, I've been going back and reliving the epic saga of Master Chief Petty Officer John 117 via the quite good *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*. I remember in middle school playing the original trilogy solo or co-op with my fellow little gremlin boys, and for the life of us we could barely beat even a single level on the max-out Legendary difficulty. I figured: it's been years, I've grown and changed, beaten *Mass Effect* on Insanity and soloed some of the secret missions in *Destiny 2*. I've got the chops to dive right in and overcome the *Halo* series' Legendary difficulty.

I do not have the chops to dive right in and overcome the *Halo* series' Legendary difficulty. Getting through *Halo Reach* (the earliest entry story-wise) was just miserable

TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Not reading the novel tie-ins

ALSO PLAYED
Fallout: New Vegas,
Sable

for me. I went at it trial-and-error, dying dozens of times a level like in *Hotline Miami*, but without that game's rapid pace to accommodate such tactics. I found myself wanting to play anything but Reach's campaign, and when I finally crossed the finish line and watched the last and most boring member of Noble Team kick the bucket (spoilers), I was spent.

FORWARD UNTO DAWN

I chose a different path when starting *Combat Evolved*. Call me a quitter. Call me weak. Call me a soft-willed

baby boy, but I lowered the difficulty to Heroic. You know what? I'm having fun again. I remember why I loved these games so much in the first place. I'm actually savouring the huge, awe-inspiring levels and smartly-designed firefights. It remains a challenge, but the Chief still feels like a superhuman in one-ton armour, as opposed to the way Legendary reduces him to an average joe in a cosplay outfit.

As a matter of fact, I'm having such a good time it's making me want to go back and give *Reach* another go. I was so stressed out by my playthrough that I didn't give Bungie's farewell to the franchise much of a chance to shine. It's a really neat game, and does a lot of work building the setting outside of the *Halo* installations themselves.

I've learned an important lesson: I don't have to prove anything to anyone by beating videogames at a high difficulty, I'm doing this to have fun. Being good at videogames is an unstable base to build your self-esteem on, you have to derive your self-worth from more concrete things, like lifting weights or having a lot of money. ■

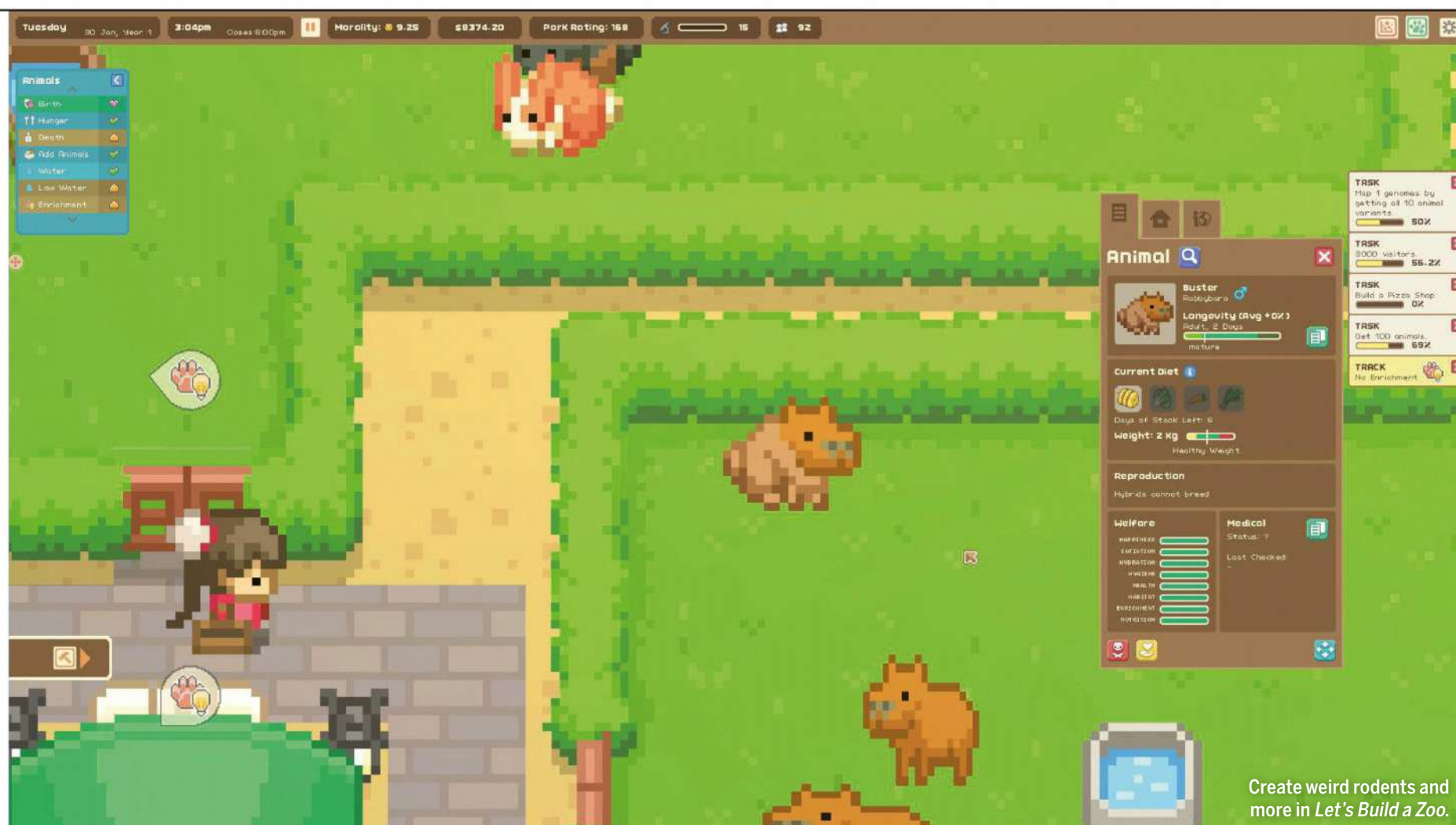
THE GREAT GREEN KNIGHT AND THE NAKED BLUE LADY WHO LIVES IN HIS HAT



LEFT: Super high difficulty isn't cool. You know what's cool? Shooting aliens.

BELOW: I'm missing in this shot and I don't even care.





“I’d be relying on the goose end to truly upset my visitors”

Playing a malevolent god in **LET'S BUILD A ZOO**

Let's Build a Zoo isn't quite a traditional tycoon game. The main goal is to construct and run a home for wildlife, attracting and catering to visitors and making sure your animals are well looked-after, but there's an intriguing Jurassic Park-esque twist on offer here. Not content with just letting you look after your animals, or even breed new ones, *Let's Build a Zoo* lets you create your very own hybrid monstrosities from whatever animals you have on display.

Early on, my goal was clear – I would create the most horrifying new animal possible with the tools at my disposal. That was easier said than done, however, as your dedicated DNA-splicing building comes prefabricated and ready to go quite early in the game. At that point, my zoo still offered little more to look at than rabbits and geese. Not only did that mean my wildlife venture looked more like a farmyard than a zoo, it also meant I'd be relying heavily on

ALI JONES



THIS MONTH
Didn't stop to think if he should

ALSO PLAYED
Hextech Mayhem: A League of Legends Story

the goose end of my hybrid if I wanted to truly upset my visitors.

Thankfully, a few new arrivals – a few snakes, some hyena and a pair of zen capybara – made things feel a little less like a quintessential English village and gave me a few more options for my experimentation. Unfortunately, the mad scientists running my splicer required a baseline understanding of each animal's entire genetic code if they could hope to splice them. To achieve that, I'd need five varieties of each

AFTER DAYS IN THE SPLICER, MY CREATION WAS USHERED OUT INTO THE WORLD

species, which would require a painstaking program of breeding and exchanges with other zoos.

LIFE FINDS A WAY

I had been making great strides in my reptile house and aviary. The egg-laying prowess of my geese had proved astonishing, and as such I had enough variety to unpick their genome. Meanwhile, some cunning trades provided my zoo with new arrivals and meant I'd also unlocked the hidden secrets of my snakes. The next step was obvious.

After five days in the splicer, my creation was ushered out into the world. The snakoose – a monstrosity with the furious head of a goose stitched to the body of a snake. *Let's Build a Zoo's* pixel art and my own lack of reptilian expertise made it difficult to tell whether the body was that of a deadly coral snake or one of its many harmless imitators, but I spent enough time treading carefully around the geese in my hometown to know that however dangerous the back end might have been, the front would be far more terrifying. ■



ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Eivor's odyssey just got a lot bigger. *By Lauren Aitken*

Assassin's Creed Valhalla players got a nice little surprise at the end of 2021 in the recent 1.4 update. A new area unlocked for us to explore: the Isle of Skye, though Scottish accents seem to be in short supply during the Viking age. There are new mysteries, artefacts and wealth to find as well as a few new raids to complete, plus an exciting new quest.

If you were wondering how Assassin's Creed Infinite might look in the future, a quick visit to the Isle of Skye might give you a clue. If you pay a visit to Ravensthorpe, a visitor will request your help on the Isle of Skye. Night terrors have gripped the population and folk have begun acting in a very strange manner, with Valka predicting that Randvi is the cause. Upon a little investigating, Eivor discovers that it's not Randvi at all, but Assassin's Creed Odyssey's protagonist, Cassandra, who seems to be the root of the issue. She's immortal and also an affiliate of the Hidden Ones, similar to Eivor, though her arrival was unexpected. The two battle it out amidst dozens of corpses – incredibly cool two watch if you've picked female Eivor, especially – before forming an alliance of sorts as they hunt for a hidden artefact. They even have a little drinking competition at the end

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 2020

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/3zPNtpy

and engage some flyting to toast a newlywed couple, as well as their newfound friendship. Who said assassins can't be pals?

SKYE'S THE LIMIT

There's not a huge amount to do in Skye, admittedly. There's a raid or two available to help you grab more gear to upgrade Ravensthorpe with and there's a nice standing stone



ODYSSEY'S, KASSANDRA, SEEMS TO BE THE ROOT OF THE ISSUE

mystery that ties in with the main questline. There's also a new horse to select that's a stunning black beauty, which makes running around the hillsides quite romantic. One of the best elements of this update is visiting known locations from real life, such as the Fairy Pools and the Old Man of Storr. Finally, some representation! But the immersion is ruined as I didn't

hear a single Skye lilt from any of the NPCs which sucks, considering that many other accents and dialects are represented through the many other playable countries and regions in Valhalla. Not even a wee, "Ciamar a tha thu?" from the locals as I sprinted by with my hammer out. Shame.

It was good to take a break from kingmaking, though, it was getting a bit repetitive. Working with Cassandra to lift a curse – a curse that was sort of her own doing – was a lot of fun and Eivor and Cassandra share a lot of fun banter together. It did feel that the core story relied on you having played Odyssey, though, so if you skipped the Greek chapter you might be wondering what the hell she's talking about. Eivor has clearly seen enough shit by this point as she isn't the slightest bit surprised by seeing another with an assassin's blade, though she is sceptical of Cassandra's plan. In true form, Eivor works out her issues with Cassandra and makes another pal that she'll likely never see again. Unless she also starts travelling through time and space, who knows.

The crossover quest is short-lived but enjoyable, taking a little spark from both games and fitting them together nicely. It would have been more fun to play as Cassandra and have her throw a few axes around. It was also a bit disappointing that the entire fight between them was a cutscene as I would have enjoyed whacking her with my hammer.

Whether this is how Assassin's Creed Infinite will work in the future is still up for debate, but as a test run for crossovers it's gone down well with both Valhalla and Odyssey fans. Odyssey players will remember a short cross-over in the game, too, so it's not an altogether new concept. Valhalla's third DLC, Dawn of Ragnarok, comes on March 10 and you'll once again be cosplaying as Odin as you face the biggest threat yet. ■



ROK & ROLL

Dawn of Ragnarok is a huge new expansion for the game



MYTHICAL

It's a delve back into Viking mythology, looking along the same lines as the Asgard quests from the main game.



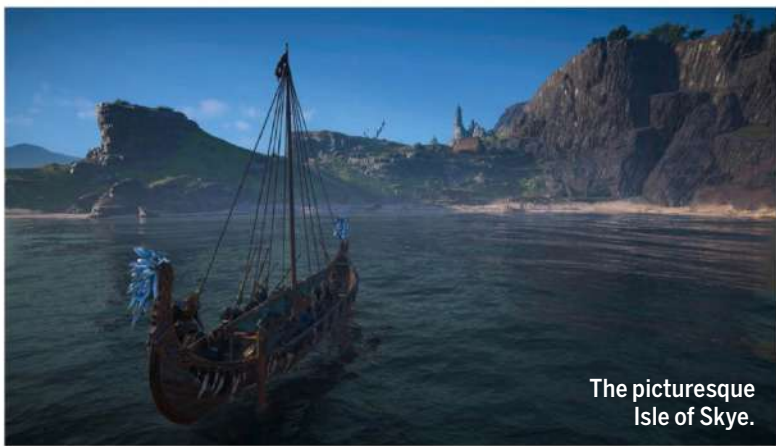
NEW POWERS

You'll gain some even more outlandish abilities to reflect your godly power – including shapeshifting.



COUGH UP

Unfortunately, this expansion isn't included in the season pass – you'll have to fork out another £34 for it.



The picturesque Isle of Skye.



A Greek and a Viking walk into a graveyard...



ABOVE: The start of a beautiful friendship?

LEFT: My face when I heard the Skye residents' accents.



BELOW: "And my axe!"



Overarm vs underarm.

Reporting for guard duty. Which means just standing here, basically.



Guards don't like it when guards do crimes.



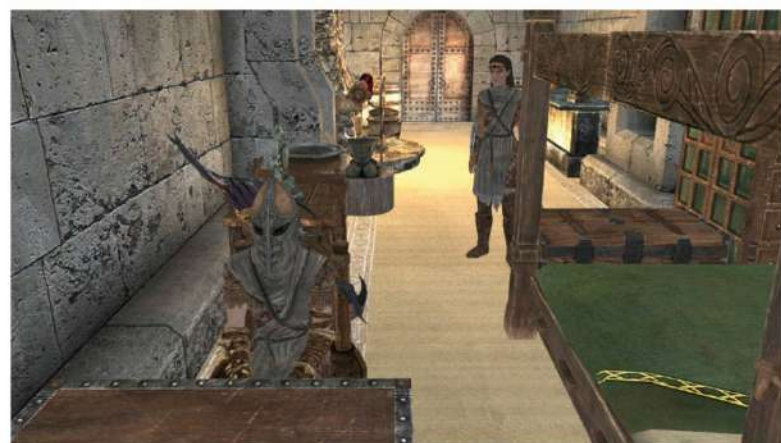
BE A GUARD

Patrol the mean streets in Skyrim. *By Christopher Livingston*



FAR LEFT: My private office, where I can pretend to do important guard paperwork.

LEFT: I'm either going to arrest you or hire you. Depends on my mood.



If you've spent any amount of time in *Skyrim* you're familiar with the various guards patrolling its cities and towns. Typically rude, aloof, with ears finely tuned for the sound of a pick scraping a lock or an apple being liberated from a tavern table, the guards of *Skyrim* are all too happy to spit a passing insult your way or boast that they too could be an adventurer if not for a dubious arrow-related knee injury. Guards are jerks, in other words, ready to call in an entire barracks-worth of backup over a five-dollar bounty or tease you about a missing sweet roll.

You know them, you hate them, and you've probably killed your fair share of them, but there are always more where they came from. So as the saying goes, if you can't beat them, join them. *Be a Guard* is a mod for *Skyrim* that lets you enlist in the ranks so you can walk patrols, arrest lawbreakers and beggars, release prisoners on bail, and strut around just like the guards in the game.

My life as a *Skyrim* cop begins near the city of Solitude, where a new building has been added by the mod. It's called the Imperial Prison Delta, and it's a stately tower located

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 11, 2011

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
elderscrolls.bethesda.net

directly west of Solitude and south of the Thalmor embassy. I'm entering as a Dragonborn hero, but I'll leave as something far more important (in my own mind, at least). A guard.

The Imperial Prison Delta tower has a number of rooms. On the bottom floor are prison cells for those who have run afoul of the law. On the



AS THE SAYING GOES, IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM, JOIN THEM

main floor I find the court, which is where I need to begin, because that's where the magistrate sits behind his desk. I walk up and ask if I can join the guard, and since the magistrate has absolutely zero standards, I'm welcomed aboard without even a single interview question like "Where do you see yourself in five years?" (probably still playing *Skyrim*, honestly) and "What would you say is your greatest weakness?" (that I can't stop playing *Skyrim*.)

The magistrate hands over a suit of Stormcloak armour, so I'll fit in nicely with the rest of the guards in Solitude. I immediately ask to be paid, and the magistrate hands over a pile of gold. Even if I never lock up a single criminal, I'm already ahead.

WALKING A BEAT

I have a second request for the magistrate within my first five

PETTY CRIMES

Here are a few oddities when it comes to law and order in *Skyrim*



1 Dropping a weapon can get you a bounty. I guess it's considered to be littering?



2 If an animal witnesses a crime, you'll have to kill it before it squeals. Or squawks.



3 Killing a chicken in Riverwood will get the entire town out for your blood. Ye chicken chaser.



4 Standing near a dead body can be enough to get you arrested, even if you aren't the killer.



5 Guards always know which items in your inventory are stolen, even if no one saw your thievery.

seconds of employment, because every cop needs a partner. I ask if I can hire another guard, and once again my wish is granted. I've got a new follower named Octavio Cato, and she'll not just help me out as I run around arresting people, I can also ask her to heal me if I get injured. The mod even allows us to get married, though I'm more interested in keeping our relationship on a professional basis.

It's time to get to work, except it isn't, really. I've got something else on my to-do list before I start actually earning my Septims. I leave the court and walk across the hall, where I have a very small, but still swanky, private office. Not bad for a new hire! Inside I find a bed, a chair and desk where I can pretend to be working, a cooking workbench, a suit of Imperial armour that's somehow been crammed into a jewellery box, and a sack of gold on the counter. I help myself to the coin and take a long nap. It's been a tough first day on the job, but I feel like I'm already making *Skyrim* a safer place.

The next morning I decide, grudgingly, that it's time to actually start a patrol. To get into my role as a guard, I decide I won't run anywhere unless it's required, so I saunter slowly over to Solitude and start walking a beat. It's not long before I run into a familiar face, Noster Eagle-Eye, the war veteran turned beggar. As a guard, I have the right to arrest Noster for violating some sort of anti-begging statute, which feels a bit mean, not to mention pointless. Solitude is a wealthy, fancy-pants city and Noster hanging around hoping to collect a Septim or two won't bankrupt the place. Also, as the Dragonborn, I'm pretty much the only person who ever actually gives him any money.

But I'm a guard now! I'm a jerk. I immediately arrest him, which causes him to vanish. He'll respawn over at the prison to arrange bail for himself, then make the trip back to Solitude. So, in true guard fashion, I'm not really cleaning up the streets or cutting down on crime, I'm just inconveniencing people. Perfect!

THE RAID

Along with beggars, I'm free to arrest any members of the Thieves Guild and the Assassin's Guild. That sounds like it could be awkward, since I've completed those quest lines and I am

essentially the head of those guilds, but seeing how those guilds are filled with back-stabbers and pocket-pickers, maybe it's not a surprise that I'm going to double-cross them. You shouldn't put your trust in murderers and thieves, and I'm both.

I stroll around Solitude for a while, stopping every single citizen who crosses my path to see if I have the option to arrest them, but there don't seem to be any assassins or thieves in the city. So it's time for a little interstate policing. I take Octavia and we head to Riften. There's sure to be plenty of scumbags hanging around that town. After a pass of the city streets, we head the Thieves Guild hideout, the tavern called The Ragged Flagon.

The place is packed, and after chatting with the various members of the Guild I simply start arresting them. Rayvan Imyan, Etienne Rarnis, Cynric Endell, Thrynn, Garthar, Niruin, Vekel, the whole crew. Eventually it's just me and Octavia and a big, empty tavern. Sorry, fellow thieves. That's just how the world works. I just happen to have a line on *Skyrim*'s criminal underworld because I've spent a couple hundred hours being a *Skyrim* criminal.

At any rate, it's not like all these thieves will be locked up, they'll just need to pay their bail at the prison and then slowly walk all the way back to Riften. But I've sent a clear message to the Guild: crime doesn't pay, unless you're a guard, in which case it pays pretty well.

Since I'm bringing the hammer down on one criminal organisation I

belong to, I should really do the right thing and take care of the other criminal organisation I belong to. My partner and I head to Dawnstar, where I infiltrate the Brotherhood sanctuary since I pretty much run the place. I do get some pleasure from arresting Cicero, the annoying jester creep, but feel a little bad about arresting Babette. Sure, she's a vampire assassin, and



I'VE SENT A MESSAGE TO THE GUILD: CRIME DOESN'T PAY

even though she's 300 years old she still looks and sounds like a kid, and arresting a child seems like a jerk move even for a jerk guard. But this is a raid, and I want every last assassin to pay the price. I arrest Nazir, too, which feels good because I don't remember liking him, but a moment later I remember it's Nazeem I don't like, not Nazir. Well, nothing says I can't dislike someone just because their name reminds me of someone I dislike, so I feel like justice has been served.

BUSTED

I figure I've reached my arrest quota, and I certainly don't feel like wandering every last city or town looking for any straggling assassins or thieves who weren't at their respective headquarters during my raid, so I head back to Solitude. I spot Noster, who's back from jail, and rather than arresting him I 'hire' him, which means he gets a bit of cash and I get a boost to my Speechcraft skill. I conduct a few patrols and pick up my pay, but without the Dragonborn (me) there's really no one committing rampant crimes in the city.

Which makes me wonder – what if I do commit a crime? I try to pick a lock on a display case in a store in Solitude, and I'm somewhat comforted to see everyone freak out. Outside I'm accosted by a mob of guards who want to murder me for a small attempted theft. I surrender and am sent to prison. Ah, this is more like it. Being a *Skyrim* cop was fun for a bit, but I'm the Dragonborn. Crime is second nature to me. I think it's time to hang up my guard armour and go back to being a thief. ■

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Guards make comments based on aspects of your adventure. They're usually not nice

"What are you killing, butterflies?"

– When you're holding an iron sword

"Stay out of trouble, lizard."

– When you're an Argonian

"You smell like a wet dog."

– When you're a werewolf

"You been grave robbing?"

– When you're wearing ancient Nord armour

"Whatever you need, Dragonborn. Just say the word."

– When you've saved the world





ABOVE: I've infiltrated the assassins! (It wasn't hard because I'm an assassin.)

FAR LEFT: I only wish I could arrest these annoying kids.



Say hello to your new HQ, where all the coolest guards hang out.



GET STARTED IN

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

Everything new players need to know before joining the hunt. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Weapons and armour:
bit.ly/3dYy0cE

Palamutes and Palicoes:
bit.ly/3yuZzn8

Settings preview:
bit.ly/3sgwpY5



SLOW AND STEADY

1 While Rise streamlines much of the rather dense *Monster Hunter* experience for beginners, its myriad systems and menus can make it daunting for newcomers. Don't be overwhelmed, though: focus on the fundamentals, covered well in the game's tutorials.



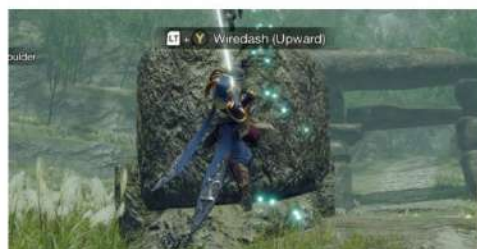
STORY TIME

2 Once you've learned the basic hunting mechanics, move on to Village Quests. Given by Hinoa, in the main Kamura Village area, these single player-only main story missions should be finished before you attempt the tougher, multiplayer-focused Hub Quests.



WEAPONS FREE

3 Choosing between the 14 weapon types can be daunting, so make the most of the training area in Kamura Village. Here you can try each form of offence at your disposal and start to learn their long list of combos. Give the switch-axe a go, it's pretty great.



MOVEMENT BUG

4 You can use wirebugs to traverse the world and climb to higher ground faster. Watch your number of charges at the bottom of the screen (on a cooldown). Your charges can be increased to three by finding stray wirebugs in the world.



SILK SONG

5 Wirebugs are also useful in combat. Use Wirefall to recover from being knocked down, Wiredash to move in the air, and mount monsters, once you've done enough damage. There's also Silkbind attacks, moves unique to each weapon type.



YOU'RE WELCOME

6 Chat to all Kamura residents and take on Requests. These tasks can be done during a bigger hunt for more rewards. Just do them before dispatching your main target, otherwise you may get booted back to the village.



BEST BUDS

7 Bring wolf-like Palamutes to join you and your Palico on hunts. They will fight alongside you, but you can also ride them to move quicker without you using any stamina. You can use items and restore health while riding, which is handy when a monster starts running away.

GRAPES OF RATHOLOS *How to take down your next gargantuan beast*



1

SEVERED HEAVEN

Aim to dismember monsters for greater damage and loot. For example, use bladed weapons to sever tails, and blunt weapons to remove horns and for a chance to stun your target.

2

FORTY WINKS

Pay attention to monster status effects. If your target is limping, stunned, or asleep, that's your opportunity to get in more damaging attack combos that take longer to execute.

3

SHEATHING PAINS

The vast majority of weapon types are bulky, so it's not surprising that pocketing them boosts your movement speed. If you need more mobility, put it away if you can.

**PET PROJECTS**

8

Recruit and train Palicoes and Palamutes in Kamura Village's Buddy Plaza. Here you can scout for new buddies, send standby ones on missions to gather items and materials, and level them up with Kamura Points to help develop their hunting skills.

**TRIPLE THREAT**

9

Eat meals before going on each hunt to dramatically boost your health and stamina, and get the chance of various buffs. You can only have three Bunny Dangos in each meal, but you can stick to your favourites on the handy 'Order the Usual' menu.

**PACKING PREP**

10

Once you've got a sense of the most useful items to you, make your between-hunt prep simpler by creating item loadouts. Generally you'll need a balance of healing potions, stamina-restoring rations and debuff counters depending on the monster you're facing.

**HOLD YOUR HORSES**

11

Don't head straight for your target monster at the beginning of a mission. Instead, take your time to gather resources and endemic life that exists in the world, which offer buffs and crafting aid. For specific resource locations, you can check your map.

**SUPPLY AND DEMAND**

12

Take full advantage of your camp supply box containing resources that can give you clues as to what you'll need for the challenge ahead. Just know that you can't take these back to the village, so use them before your own items.



THE IRON FIST WEARS AN IRON GLOVE IN AGE OF EMPIRES IV

PART I

Can a sledgehammer crack a nut? There's only one way to find out. *By Ian Evenden*

THE RULES

1. Make massed attacks only.
2. Siege engines: yes please.
3. Leave the enemy a smoking ruin.

Who bought PC Gamer issue 13? Hands up. The longer-lived among readers might remember the *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* demo contained on one of its cover floppies. After two scenarios of jolly orc-bashing lifted from the game, the third and final (if I remember correctly, which it's possible I don't) level of the demo was a custom scenario (I hope) that gave you a human village surrounded by a ring of orcs, who would merrily chop their way through your tiny population and all its huts.

It was an unwinnable scenario, a Kobayashi Maru that, instead of teaching important lessons about not violating treaties and allowing examiners to observe how a commander reacts, merely demonstrates that any village or population is vulnerable to overwhelming force.

Which brings us to *Age of Empires*. I played a lot of this while pretending to study at university in the late 1990s, right in the middle of the RTS boom kicked off by *Warcraft* vs *Command & Conquer*. I've still got the books on Michel Foucault if anyone wants an essay, but I've also retained a weird preference for a custom skirmish game on *Age of Empires II*'s Narrows map. The beauty of Narrows is that enemy scouts won't cross the deeper bits of water, so instead of building a wall around yourself you only need to place gates in strategically chosen places to seal off a surprisingly large area. Once your army is complete – a mailed fist composed of longbowmen, men at arms, and lots and lots of trebuchets – you open a gate and march out to destroy the AI's city.

It doesn't work so well against human opponents, admittedly, but it's a tactic that finds itself played out again and again in tank rushes across multiple RTSes. The one series it's not particularly valid for is *Warcraft*, in which the management of small forces takes precedence over the application of overwhelming numbers. So we take to the battlefields of *Age of Empires IV* to discover whether tactics more suited to *Starcraft* can work on a medieval battlefield.

WALL ABOARD

Full of bravado, or full of something, anyway, I fire up the new game. I haven't played it much at this point but that

doesn't matter, surely? I play through the tutorial with William (it will never get old to hear him cry "Incontinent!" – I am 42 years old) and feel myself getting back into the old swing of things. So I fire up a skirmish game like in the old days. The Narrows map seems to have vanished, but there is one, Confluence, that has a similar feel. With one other AI player on a small map, with standard starting resources beginning in Age I, what could possibly go wrong?

Well, for one thing, my age-old tactic of walling off my area with gates won't work any more because the terrain is much more complex. I have to build a longer palisade wall, hoping to upgrade it later. I pop a watchtower

WHILE ERECTING THOSE DEFENCES I'VE TRAPPED A RED SCOUT IN MY AREA

behind it, do the same thing on the other river crossing, and get back to building up my forces. I'm the English, in blue, hoping to unleash longbowmen and trebuchets on my enemy, the Holy Roman Empire in red. The English have a really straightforward playstyle, and get men at arms early on in the game, so hopefully they'll be a good choice for both an early military strike and for the defences I intend to erect.

Problem is, while erecting those defences I've inadvertently trapped a red scout in my area. He was busy rounding up sheep but is now unable to escape, and as I've only built a wall instead of a gate, I can't let him out. Want to know how to drive an *Age of Empires* AI opponent into a rage? This is how. The blocked river crossing to the west of my settlement suddenly becomes the front line in all-out war – two horsemen, at least four men at arms, and some prelates come charging out of the woods, take down the fence, destroy the watchtower, and begin sacking my gold-mining operation. I drive them off with scouts and longbowmen, but they're soon back, and in greater numbers.

To cut an embarrassing story short, the Holy Roman Empire leaves me with a single longbowman before

running back through the gap in the wall, and I don't have enough food reserves to create more villagers because the Ottonians stole all the sheep. Quit game.

It has become clear that this is not going to be an easy challenge, and may require actual hard work, thought and planning, three things I'm not used to applying.

My first mistake was in choosing the pope-botherers as my opponents. They're a highly militaristic bunch when not rounding up sheep, and are good at both attack and defence. Their prelate support units are available right from the start, and can both heal units and inspire them, which ups their damage by 15% and gives them more armour. They actually sound like a great choice for my overwhelming force doctrine.

BELOW: An English village. Quiet, peaceful, serene.





I CAN SIEGE FOR MILES AND MILES

Know your siege engines



TREBUCHET

A massive beam with something nasty on the end, hauled back by manpower then sent flying skyward by a counterweight.



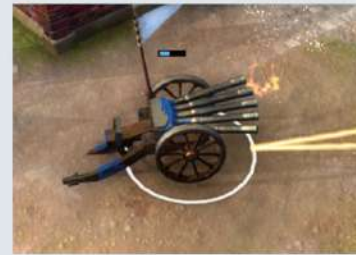
CANNON

Cheating, in some people's opinion. A long tube with gunpowder at one end, some sort of projectile, and a bad attitude.



NEST OF BEES

Replaces the mangonel in Chinese arsenals. This is firework-shotgun useful against massed troops and, it seems, trebuchets.



RIBAULDEQUIN

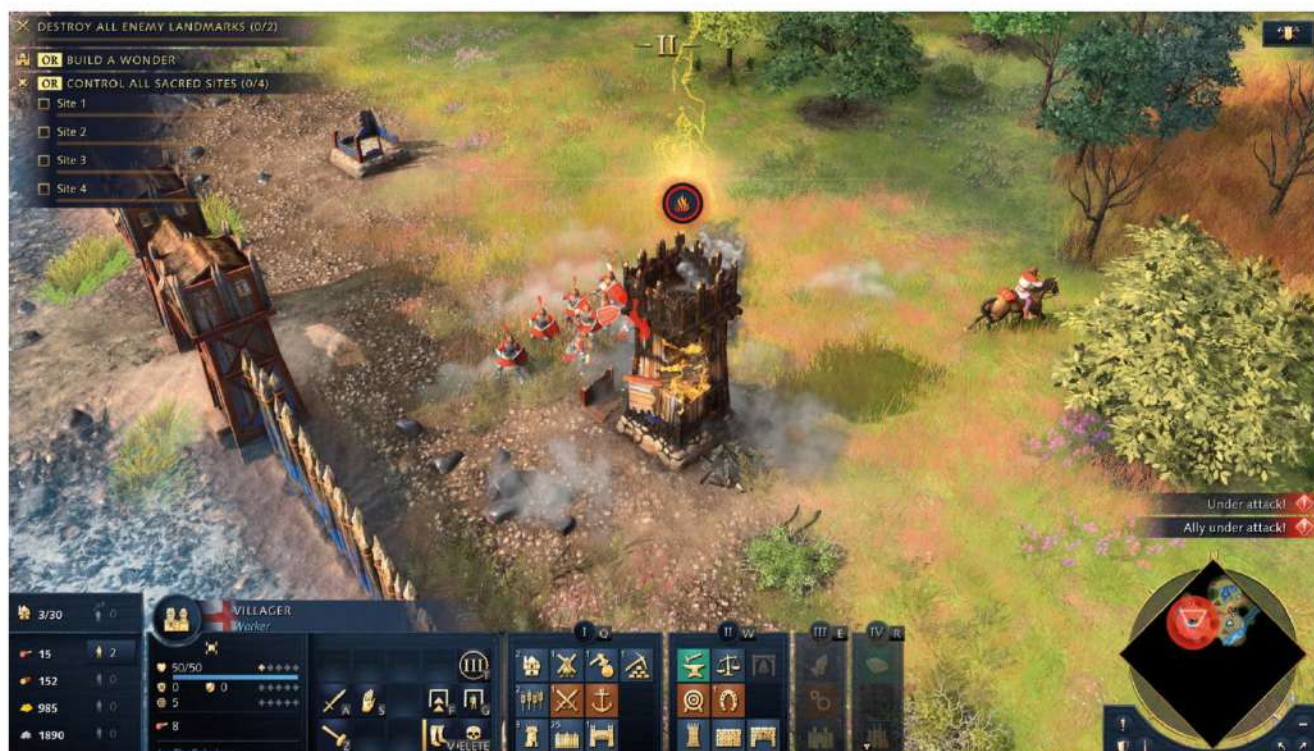
Despite being difficult to spell, this useful five-barrelled gun can cut down ranks of infantry, but falls in the face of fire arrows.

My second was in the choice of map – it was too small, forcing us to clash too early before the overwhelming force could be built up. Back to the title screen. What I need is a civilisation suited to early aggression, and that means fast production. The Mongols look like a good choice, with their unpredictable mobility, oovoos for automatic mining, and generally being a perfect fit for a hit-and-run strategy, but a bit of an acquired taste. Then there's the French, another straightforward faction that has strong military units and the ability to produce cavalry and archers faster if I lay my town out properly. The French look good.

SIEGE MENTALITY

Skirmish maps can have any of three victory conditions: either you destroy all enemy landmarks, build yourself a Wonder and successfully defend it, or take control of all the map's sacred sites. This last one involves plonking a religious unit on an eerie ruin and leaving it there for ten minutes, hoping an enemy military unit doesn't come along to ruin the bread and fish. Unfortunately this doesn't work within the rules I've set for myself. The defensive option doesn't chime with the doctrine of force either, though a forceful defence of a wonder against all comers might be interesting, especially if it comes down to a valiant last stand by a few knights and archers.

BELOW: To add insult to injury, the Holy Roman Empire burns my watchtowers after breaching my wall.



But really, what I need to do is to sally forth and burn my opponent's civilisation to the ground. This time the map is Mongolian Heights, it is tiny, and I am the French. The sacred site win condition is turned off, my opponents are the Chinese, and we're starting in Age IV with high resources. This is totally going to be my game.

It starts well, I send my scout rounding up sheep, immediately have a villager building walls to keep out the enemy scouts while rounding up sheep myself. I build an archery range, barracks and stables before running out of resources and having to concentrate on early game stuff like houses and lumber camps for a while. This means I'm completely unprepared when a bunch of Chinese horsemen pitch up and begin slaughtering all my sheep before rampaging unopposed through my town because I'd forgotten to create any troops. Restart.

This time, I'm ready for them. I don't worry about the walls, as I know Chinese scouts will be after my sheep anyway and I don't want to accidentally trap one. I get straight on with building a keep which will speed up military production. My opponent tries exactly the same tactic as last time, sending an early expeditionary force into my village to cause damage. Thankfully, a mixed defence of mounted knights and hand-cannoneers slaughters the lot of them, though the game quickly gets obsessed with telling me to build a lumber camp even though the trees are in easy walking distance of the town centre. I build one just to shut it up.

Production has slowed as all my villagers have been assigned to tree-cutting, so I spread them out between the four resources, and as the numbers begin to rise I fend off a few more exploratory attacks by Chinese archers. They're coming over in dribs and drabs, suggesting my opponent doesn't have an overwhelming force doctrine in play. Then, something wonderful happens.

HIT AND MISS

I have enough gold to build a trebuchet. I set it up on the outskirts of the village just to see how magnificent it is – and just at that moment an enemy scout comes along. I send all my forces after it,



I LOCATE AN ENEMY BUILDING AND OPEN FIRE WITH THE MAGNIFICENT TREBUCHET

and the trebuchet takes a shot. It misses – the item description is quite clear about it being inaccurate against moving targets – but it's a wonderful moment, and fills me with confidence about taking out the enemy HQ.

So I send my troops across the river. An enemy scout harries us, but he's very easily swatted away. I locate an enemy building and open fire with the magnificent trebuchet. I catch a glimpse of what might be a cannon retreating, and take down the barracks before sending my troops in. The enemy keep and watchtower slaughter them all, and my trebuchet is left alone, flinging stones at buildings on the edge of its range. It can't survive for long like this, and I don't have enough resources at home to produce more than a few spearmen.

If this was *Age of Empires I* I'd be summoning nuke troopers right now, or possibly a baby on a tricycle with a shotgun. They really knew how to reward cheat codes in the 90s. *Age IV* doesn't have cheats, yet, and that glimpse of a cannon is really worrying me. Chinese engineering eventually does for my trebuchet, taken down in seconds by fire arrows and a sort of firework launcher called the Nest of Bees, one of the Chinese unique units.

Then they come for my village. More of the firework launchers, three cannon, and many, many fire-arrow archers. I'd been upgrading my keep with defensive weapons, just in case, but they count for nothing if the enemy can stand-off and bombard you. The mangonels I was stockpiling for another attack go down easy, my villagers get set on fire despite valiantly fighting back with their bows, and before I know it my blacksmith is on fire and they're closing in on the town centre. Their attack on me is exactly how I envisaged the iron fist of ultimate force would be. Forlornly, I build a ribauldequin – a type of five-barrelled gun – before my siege workshop succumbs, and go down fighting. ■

ABOVE: The hand-cannoneers appear to fire from telescopes under their arms, but they're very effective.

LOWER LEFT: This skirmish in the berry bushes is my greatest victory of this campaign.





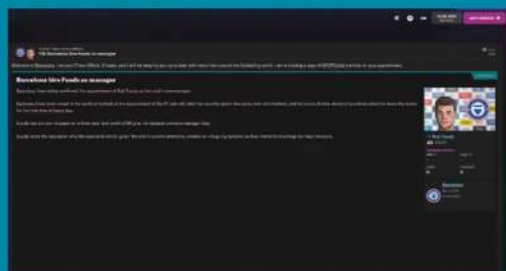
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

CHEATING IN

FOOTBALL MANAGER

Dastardly dealings from inside sport's greatest spreadsheet. *By Phil Iwaniuk*



LEFT: £29.5 million on an unproved lower-league youngster. Why not?



Very few football fans will be familiar with the career of former Barcelona manager Bart Celona. Only those who lived within the savegame of my *Championship Manager 2* career were there to witness his brief but eventful three-week stint at the giant, during which time he broke concurrent transfer records on several unheard-of English teenagers from York City and brokered staggeringly generous deals on Barca players going the other way.

As the years went by, it wasn't so easy to cheat at *Champ Man*. It's always been possible to conjure up a new manager and add them to any club in the world, but over time their rampant recklessness was tempered by higher-ups. Try to siphon away Real Madrid's fortunes and boards got involved, casting a suspicious eye over the transfer targets of their newly appointed Ray Almadrids, and stepping in to block moves that they deemed 'unrealistic'.

Of course, that only made the cheating more delicious. It's one thing to player.additem your way to riches in *Skyrim*, ticking up an arbitrary number with a console command, but breaking the game in *Football Manager* requires a level of lateral thinking that goes way beyond finding the command that makes your number of goals go up.

The classic cheat move, series-long, is save-scumming. I found myself doing this in the particularly unpredictable *Football Manager 2005*. Here's how it works: let's say you're particularly aggrieved by the way Arsenal beat your Middlesborough

THE EMBEZZLE ONE

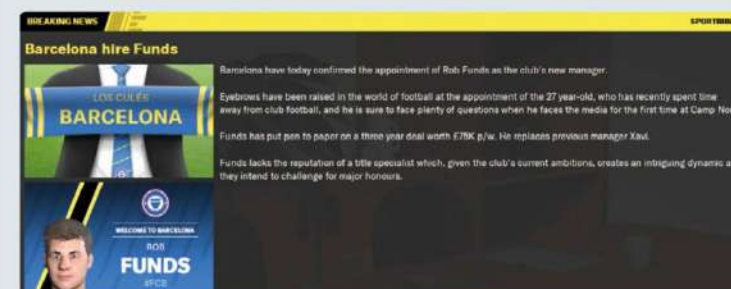
How to spot a fraud manager in FM22

1 No previous history in management

"Says on your CV you quite like football – when can you start?"

2 Immediately employed by massive club

Most bosses cut their teeth in lower leagues. Not this one.



3 Improbable pun or insult for a name

Ask yourself: how many Phuq Hughs have you met before?

4 Resigns after three weeks

And not just from the club. That's him and management totally done.

side – two late penalties, for goodness sake. You reload the game, set up your team the exact same way, and expect the match engine to right the wrong. Instead you're beaten 4-1. The only option now was to create a new manager at Arsenal with an insulting name, play Henry in goal, and a 2-2-2-4 outfield formation filled by youth goalkeepers. The resultant 11-1

YOU'RE MANAGING IN THE BUNDESLIGA, BUILDING A CONTENDER WITH MAINZ

win did feel a bit hollow, but three points are three points.

FOUL BALL

And that rather circuitously brings us up to modern-day *Football Manager 2022*, a game so wise to our ploys that we have to devise outlandish schemes to put one over on it. Of course, we could buy the game editor as DLC, or FMRTE, instead. I would never condemn anyone for renaming one of their youth players after themselves and editing all their stats

to 20. But it's a different kind of cheating. What's always interested me is cheating within the rules.

You're managing in the Bundesliga, slowly building a contender with Mainz. But every time one of your signings reveals himself to be of real quality, Bayern buys him. You've tried a few times to just reject their transfer bid and leave it at that, but Bayern never does leave it at that. It's a rich club, and it can afford to keep raising its transfer bid until your own board are convinced to force it through at all costs. Your bosses insist that the deal is too good to turn down, so Mainz stays exactly as good as it was before you joined. You know what must be done.

Bayern fans are baffled to see a totally unproven manager appointed the following day. Guy Ennmunich is cagey about his approach in the press conference, but proves himself quite decisive in the coming days, releasing 16 players on free transfers. Most of the previous starting 11 are shipped off abroad and are priced to sell.

Ennmunich quickly reinvests his newly generated transfer funds, into – of all places – Mainz's current crop of youngsters. They've shown little sign of promise thus far, but that hasn't stopped Bayern from shelling out over 100 million Euros in total on nine bemused teenagers.

There's a bit more business to be done with Mainz – four players only recently signed to FCB from Mainz make their way back there – and then, just weeks into his tenure, Ennmunich retires from football.

Bayern are now screwed for years to come. All their best players are gone, they've spent the proceeds on useless youth prospects, and their new manager's actually playing them in the first team, what with all the money that was just spent on them. You couldn't even call it revenge, really – but give us a spreadsheet and some players with numbers above 15 in their stats, and this is the level of monstrosity we'll succumb to. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 8, 2021

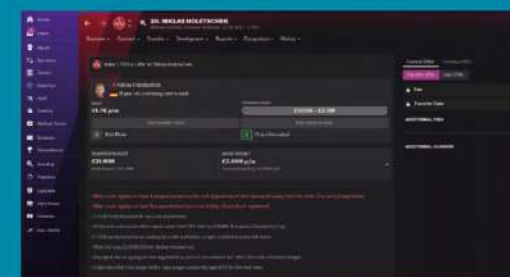
DEVELOPER
Sports Interactive

PUBLISHER
Sega

LINK
footballmanager.com



LEFT: It's 2045. Barcelona haven't won a title in 16 years. Revenge attained.





CRIMZON CLOVER

Revisiting a shmup that rivals the genre's best. *By Will Freeman*

Back in 2011, the global shmup community was awash with murmurings about a new creation within Japan's 'doujin' hobbyist game development scene. Its name was *Crimzon Clover*, and after a complete build first appeared at a Japanese fan convention in the closing days of 2010, a swirl of rumours suggested that it was very special indeed.

Fortunately, it turned out that the speculation was spot on. *Crimzon Clover* takes the form of a typically frenetic bullet hell shmup – or shoot-'em-up, to use the more traditional term – and it does it very well indeed. Like many of the best shmups, it blends a hyperactive, overwhelming pace with tremendous scoring depth, and is challenging,

rewarding and wildly exciting in equal measure. If you're imagining sweeping, terrifyingly dense bullet patterns realised in neon colours that intersect as a player ship weaves through unfeasibly small gaps while gunning down a barrage of enemies, you have exactly the right type of game in mind.

And it is available to play once more. At the close of last year, doujin studio Yotsubane's creation arrived on Steam under the title *Crimzon Clover: World EXplosion* – given a thorough polish and a range of new and tweaked modes. Its return made it hard to resist pondering the mystique around the original release, and just how well this hobbyist curio turned cult hit holds up today.

ORIGIN STORY

It's worth noting here that *Crimzon Clover*'s distinct origin story was a

huge part of its appeal, all those years ago. But surely that element of a game's appeal fades with time? Or perhaps not...

The developer Yotsubane is better known in arcade circles as CLOVER-TAC, a longstanding serial shmup world record holder and certainly one of the genre's best players. Before making his own game he had previously served as a playtester for Cave, the pioneering bullet hell studio, famed for the difficulty of its games and the depth of its fanbase's pockets. CLOVER-TAC had the skills to test the upper limit of those games – and now he was taking what he learned as an elite player and tester, and applying it to his own creation.

There was also something else about this hobbyist homage to genre greats like *DoDonPachi* that made it atypically alluring. Conventional thought states that for maximum credibility and authenticity, a shmup should start out as an arcade release.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2010

PUBLISHER
Degica

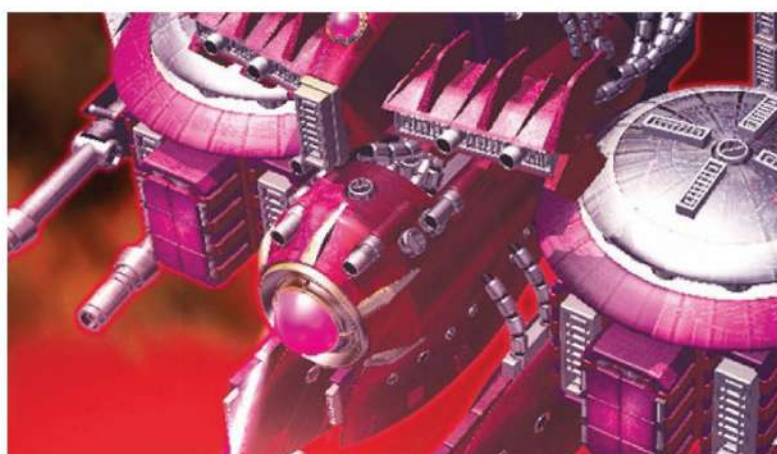
DEVELOPER
Yotsubane

LINK
degicagames.com



LEFT: Hoovering up point items never fails to be satisfying, whichever version you play.

ABOVE: Bosses and mid-stage bosses are where the most intense battles lie.



World EXplosion's boost mode offers a new way to play.



And yet here was a shoot-'em-up initially only available as a boxed PC release; a PC release so popular with genre devotees that it achieved the unthinkable, and was ported to arcade cabinets in 2013. There had been other doujin shmups on Japanese PCs before, including the popular *Touhou* series. But those games were so distinct from the design and playfeel of arcade shoot-'em-ups they can arguably be classed as a distinct sub-genre in

their own right. *Crimzon Clover*, meanwhile, plays every bit like a purebred intense arcade shooter; something strikingly apparent today.

It was also rather tricky for Westerners to even try the game – typically requiring a contact in Japan who could get it directly from CLOVER-TAC at a convention, or from one of four official stockists.

I first came across the mysterious shooting game when a fellow player bought a laptop and copy to

CRIMZON CLOVER'S DISTINCT ORIGIN STORY WAS A HUGE PART OF ITS APPEAL

London's confusingly-named Casino arcade; then a shoot-'em-up haven with an enthusiastic crowd of regulars who would lend their own arcade PCBs to the collection of aggressively well-loved, geriatric cabinets. The laptop was placed on a pool table, and we prayed that the arcade's owner wouldn't quickly eject us for evading the need to spend money in his establishment.

Everyone packed into the basement was quickly captivated. For all their efforts, the surrounding arcade cabs spewing demo modes in slashes of neon and rasping beeps could not drag attention away from what was happening on the pool table. That modest machine brought from Japan had broken into the inner sanctum of arcade gaming, and was quickly proving a coin slot isn't essential for quality shmup play.

OLD SCHOOL FLAVOUR

All of that made *Crimzon Clover* feel so special back then. What is

BULLET HEAVEN *The icons that shaped Crimzon Clover*



BATSUGUN 1993

Arguably the first ever bullet hell game, from one of the shmup genre's most important studios, Toaplan.



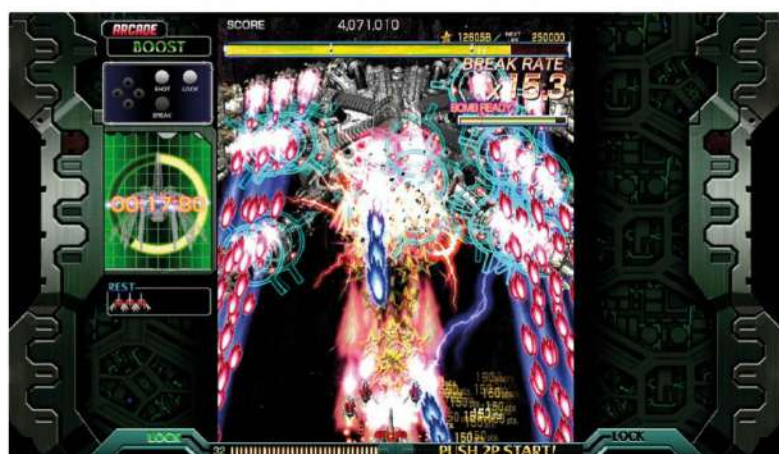
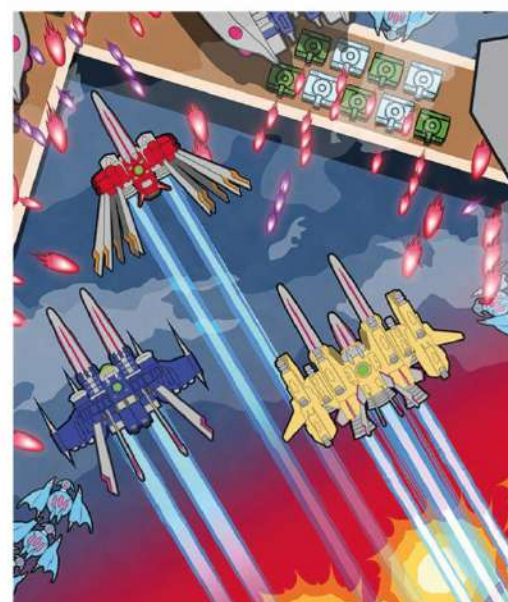
DODONPACHI 1998

Perhaps the most defining bullet hell game there is. The sequel *DoDonPachi Resurrection* is on Steam.



KETSUI 2003

Also from Cave, Ketsui offers a brutal experience that somehow demeans and delights in equal measure.



ABOVE: The decidedly retro poster promoting *Crimzon Clover*'s 2021 PC return.

RIGHT: Unleashing a 'Break' weapon power-up sits at the heart of the scoring.

» remarkable all these years on is that the story behind *Crimzon Clover* still brings something distinct. And that becomes apparent when you fire it up once more.

Loading up the game today, I braced myself to be reminded of the difference between warm nostalgic memories and timeless game design. And yet, here in the light of 2022, *Crimzon Clover* continues to defy expectations. As the work of a hobbyist going up against deeply experienced shmup studios, it quite simply shouldn't have felt so splendid in 2011; let alone a decade later.

Firing up the game's vanilla mode, it immediately packs a visual punch all these years on. Despite moving with significant pace and energy, *Crimzon Clover* remains bristling with detail that does much to convince that the setting really could be a complete, living place with much more going on 'off camera'. Of course, here in 2022, modern shmups tend to very much trade in the currency of nostalgia. All of the newly made crisp pixel art and crunchy retrospective audio present today might mean we've grown used to decidedly modern releases bringing a deliberately old-school flavour. That

might work in the original *Crimzon Clover*'s favour – today retro game art can feel very much contemporary. But without doubt, *Crimzon Clover*'s visual elements do not absolutely confine it to the past.

Working your way through the original game's three modes, it is evident that Yotsubane delivered something that transcends the quality

of a great many doujin works, including those made today.

This is where the origin story comes in. Coming from the position of being a deeply experienced consumer of the genre, and spending five years working on the game in his spare time, TAC built a shooter that makes it hard to resist the cliché that is a game being 'a love letter to its genre'.

And yet, even by his own confession, that is what Yotsubane endeavoured to craft. All these years on, his letter reads like a heartfelt devotion to how wonderful 2D shooters can be, written in screens that are consistently packed with enemy firepower, clusters of score-boosting 'gems', and torrents of cascading numbers. *Crimzon Clover* scoops up the best of titles like *DoDonPachi*, *Mushihimesama*, *Ketsui* and *Espgaluda*, and reimagines them from the player's perspective. The result is something that still feels distinct, and that toys with expectations around how these games work.

It is every part a game informed by being an avid consumer of shooters, and understanding the appeal that hides behind the most apparent gameplay; dodging and

AN EXPLOSIVE RETURN

What does the 2021 version offer?



1 The visuals have undergone a generous polish, neatly capturing the original style while bringing it forward.

2 *World Explosion* gives you a wealth of variant arrangements, upping the variety the package offers.

3 While the enemy firepower will keep coming for you, you'll find ways to make them vanish in a moment.



shooting. It also achieves something the best shmups commonly fail at.

WHAT LURKS BENEATH

To be besotted by shmups is to love what lurks beneath the screen – a dance with entangled multipliers and combos, all tied up with deliberately obscure scoring systems, weapon behaviours and playstyle. Therein lies that magic of the form – and the very element that makes it so impenetrable to so many.

Yotsubane's greatest achievement with *Crimzon Clover*, then, is in making a shooter that is authentic and challenging enough for genre obsessives, without ostracising the great many players who simply want to experience the thrill of bullet hell without giving over every moment of their gaming time to practice or scoring strategy development.

For example, *Crimzon Clover*'s approach to player life stocks still feels striking and effective. In a genre where extra lives are a deliberately limited entity, *Crimzon Clover* lets you pick between a score boost or a life at the end of every level. Making it possible to gain so many lives simply shouldn't work. To be so well stocked in additional tries is arguably undermining the drama and

TO BE BESOTTED BY SHMUPS IS TO LOVE WHAT LURKS BENEATH THE SCREEN

challenge that comes from lives being a tremendously precious currency.

But, by employing his players' perspective, Yotsubane identified an opportunity to deliver a true shmup that would satisfy two audiences. To place highly on the leaderboard, you'll need to select the score option every time, limiting lives and keeping the experience a challenge for the masochistic. But if you want to just taste an authentic bullet hell rush without relying on stripped back easy modes, the option to pick up so many lives delivers a fine balance of intensity and approachability. In fact, on reflection it feels rather curious that we haven't seen more shooters adopt such a cunning and understated innovation. It may not be an exclusive feature of *Crimzon Clover*, but it feels like it should be much more common.

CONVENTION AT ITS BEST

Ultimately, *Crimzon Clover* obeys a familiar design philosophy in a genre



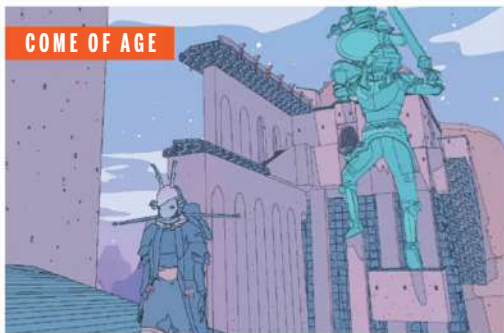
deeply constrained by convention. And yet the best shmups stand out by being creative and nuanced within those constraints – something *Crimzon Clover* does with aplomb. It remains as exciting and dynamic today as it did at launch. It boasts a generous capacity for fostering different playstyles and approaches, and has tremendous scoring depth. When you get even vaguely decent, it makes you feel like a much better player than you are – and that sensation never gets old. And if you're just passing by the genre and fancy a taste, it does a great deal to keep things welcoming.

It's hard not to love the fact that this hobbyist release took the PC to arcade gaming and triumphed and then some. Purists might tell you that the 2013 Japanese arcade release provides the best way to experience *Crimzon Clover*. If you've a love for arcade gaming it's tempting to take that position. But today so many arcades are sadly closed in the West. Casino went under the same year that Yotsubane's creation made it to cabinets. Frankly, *Crimzon Clover* is a PC game first and foremost. It also happens to be one of the best shmups you can play on any format – as it was on launch, and as it is today. ■

TED
LITCHFIELD

Welcome, traveller. Join me on a psychic sojourn through the mindscapes of our society's digital artisans. No time for questions, we depart on our mystic voyage...

COME OF AGE



SABLE

shed-works.co.uk/sable

→ I've been looking forward to *Sable* since I first started seeing gifs of it back in 2018. Shedworks took a tasteful amount of inspiration from the *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and paired it with a stunning art style that satisfied a craving I didn't even know I had.

LISTEN TO WEISS

NIER REPLICANT
VER.1.22474487139...

nier.square-enix-games.com/en-us

→ This action RPG has a way of sticking in your head. Initially met with a tepid critical response, *NieR* has gotten a positive reappraisal since the release of its 2017 sequel, *Automata*. If you've never tried it, I can't recommend it enough.

VACATION TO BAVARIA



WOLFENSTEIN: THE OLD BLOOD

bit.ly/3lrVMf4

→ MachineGames' reboot of the FPS series has been excellent, but my favourite entry remains this 2015 expansion to *The New Order*. *The Old Blood* pays homage to *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, and it delivers a dynamic little FPS campaign that doesn't wear out its welcome.

SLICE AND DICE



SAMURAI GUNN 2

doublefine.com/games/samurai-gunn-2

→ In another universe, we'd all be Gunn-heads right now. The first entry in this series was couch multiplayer perfection, but its lack of online functionality or campaign limited its staying power. *Samurai Gunn 2* replicates the thrilling one hit, one kill action with additional features.

MUST
★
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Ted Litchfield

KICK THEM

DARK MESSIAH OF
MIGHT AND MAGIC

bit.ly/3dtc3ID

→ *Dark Messiah* is to Arkane's first game, *Arx Fatalis*, as *Deathloop* is to *Dishonored*: a lot of the same ideas and immersive sim sensibilities, but more streamlined. You can also thank *Dark Messiah* for introducing us to Colt's kick of death.

WITCH ONE?



THE WITCHER

thewitcher.com/en/witcher1

→ The *Witcher 2* established CD Projekt Red's reputation, and the *Witcher 3* needs no introduction, but the first *Witcher* remains under-appreciated. It's got edges, but if you can get past its foibles you'll find the same Geralt we've come to love, all in a charming eurojank package.

ROLL THE DICE

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS
ENHANCED EDITION

nwn.beamdog.com

→ Bioware's middle child has a lot to love. The custom modules it's famous for are compatible with Beamdog's remaster, and Bioware's expansions form a fun campaign that takes you from 1d4+1 magic missile firing to archdevil summoning.

RIDE THE CHOCOBO



FINAL FANTASY XIV

finalfantasyxiv.com

→ The PC Gamer team is full of *Final Fantasy XIV* fans reminding me to, "Check out the critically acclaimed MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* with a free trial up to level 60 with unlimited playtime including the award-winning first expansion *Heavensward*!" So now it's on my own Must Play list.



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BONUS PREDICTIONS!

A few more prophetic musings for 2022 from PC gaming's greatest experts



On the 32nd anniversary of *Back to the Future III*, Rockstar will release an update that links **RED DEAD ONLINE** with **GTA ONLINE** via a modified steam train.



Nintendo will soon follow Sony and Microsoft's lead and start porting its games to PC. As a result, **MARIO KART 8** will be the best-selling game on the **STEAM DECK**.



The **GAME AWARDS 2022** will take place entirely in **VIRTUAL REALITY**, with Geoff Keighley hosting in the form of an anime catgirl avatar.



A re-release of **CYBERPUNK 2077** will spark a critical reappraisal of the game, despite the controversial dubbing over of Keanu Reeves with Peter Dinklage.



PETER MOLYNEUX will promise to turn himself into a "physical NFT". Six months later, all he'll actually have done is tattoo the word 'DIGITAL' on his forehead.



Mounts will finally be added to **NEW WORLD**, allowing each player to ride around the MMO on their own exhausted Amazon employee.

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